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DOCTOR WHO

INSTRUMENTS OF DARKNESS

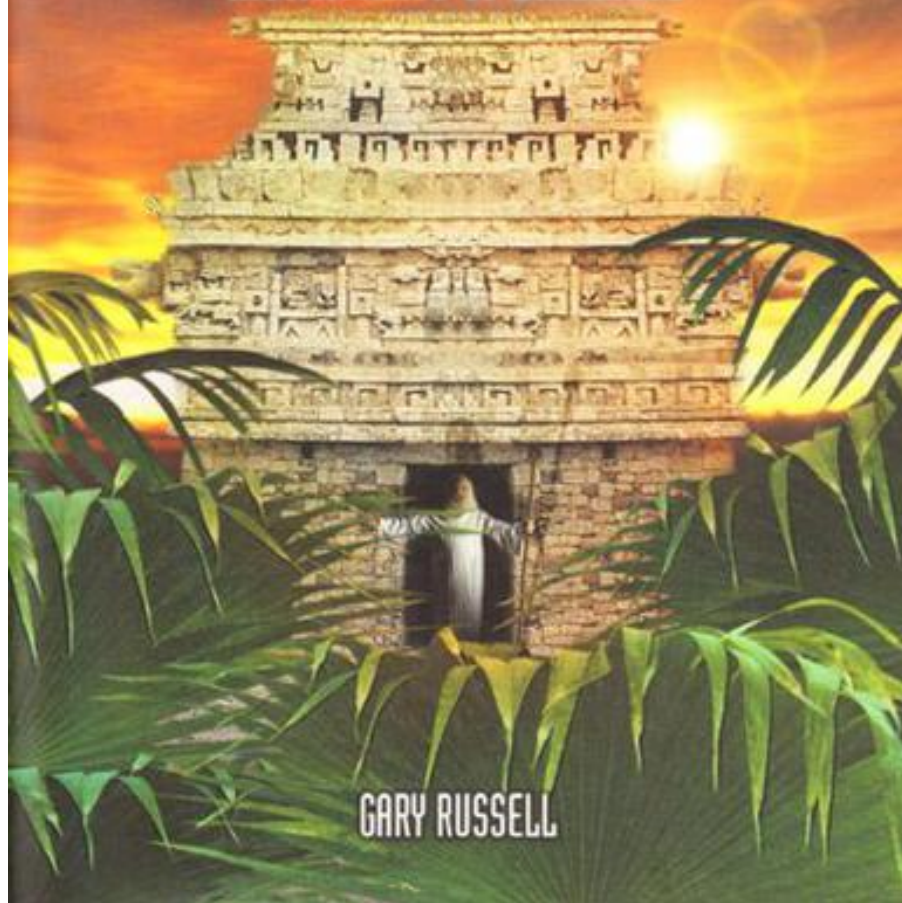


GARY RUSSELL

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INSTRUMENTS OF DARKNESS



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The leaders on planet Earth think that the Magnate is a mysterious 'shadow Government' that controls the world. It isn't. The leaders believe the Network to be a ramshackle, paranoid outfit of European anarchists who will eventually blow themselves up. They won't. The leaders believe that if there are humans who can control things with their minds – ESPnets – they're few and far between, and not worth worrying about. They're wrong. The leaders believe that one minute after midnight on 31 December 1993, a new year, full of promise, will begin. They're wrong.

The Doctor and Mel arrive on Earth just days before New Year. An old friend has been kidnapped and taken to France. And two murderous enemies are setting up a new life in the Peak District. Which of these threats should the Doctor deal with first? And why is his old travelling companion Evelyn Smythe using her knowledge of the future to make a fortune from chocolate cake recipes?!

This adventure features the Sixth Doctor and Mel.

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DOCTOR WHO



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GARY RUSSELL

DOCTOR WHO:

INSTRUMENTS OF DARKNESS

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Anyway

Acknowledgements

About the author

For John Binns

just because...

Chapter One

Something Always Happens

Warm, bright day

Mid-hotseason

Sunsleepland

Although the seas were only a half-day's walk away, the ground was dry and barren. A desert, broken only by the cacti, the weed bushes and, on the hill, a handful of tall trees which caught the rare moisture in the air when the breezes were right.

Two small ponds at the base of the hill supplied much of the water they needed.

The tribe had made its home amongst the trees. There, they were safe from any attacks from other tribes. There they could see the bison that roamed the plains and made for good dinners. The tribe were strong and plentiful – the women bore many young, few of whom died. The men were powerful and brave, blessed with intelligence and stamina.

The tribe was lucky.

For pretty Leaf Snakeskin, today was a very special day.

The young inside her was kicking, telling her and the elders it wanted to see the world, that it had sheltered for many months now and desired to see the land through its own eyes. When the pains started, Leaf gritted her teeth and did as her mother had done, and her mother's mother, and *her* mother before that. She headed to the great pond, sat within it and allowed the child to emerge, swimming to the surface whilst the waters cooled her burning.

The child broke the surface, crying for air, crying for life.

Leaf, too, cried with relief that the pain had passed, that her child was free and alive.

Brave Bisoneye was there – the child was his. He was a proud father and this was his first-born. Sixteen summers ago, he too had emerged from the pond, a healthy and beautiful son, destined perhaps to lead the tribe.

The elder women of the tribe also cried – not with relief but in fear. Brave Bisoneye stared in horror – such a creature could not be the result of his joining with Leaf Snakeskin. She had been corrupted, tainted by the evil spirits of the night who had cast out his own baby

from within her and replaced it with their own spawn.

Leaf was staring at them, her relief at having given birth dampened by their moans. She turned to retrieve her baby and saw for the first time what they had seen.

Instead of having dark skin and dark hair, her baby was pure white. The white of the clouds in the sky. And its eyes, wide open and staring, were burning red. And it had white hair, a long streak growing from the centre of its head backwards but none on the left or right.

How could she have given birth to this?

The elders of the tribe discussed it late into the day. Leaf nurtured her baby – however unusual it looked, it needed to be looked after.

And in her head, she heard a voice.

‘Mother. Take me from this primitive place, these savages.

Their brains reveal all – they will murder us both in our sleep tonight. Listen to me, mother. Take me down to the plains, to the burial grounds of our ancestors. They shall protect us.’

Slowly, as if not in complete control of her own body, Leaf Snakeskin did just that. She bundled the baby into swaddling and carried it away from the tribe. A few minutes later she knew her disappearance had been discovered, but no one followed her.

‘They are glad you are gone,’ said the voice. ‘Glad you have been taken by their pathetic demons. You do not need them. I do not need them.’

Leaf walked for many hours, until it was pitch-dark. But she had no fear. Snakes and spiders avoided her bare feet. The bison parted to let her through. It was as if they gave her more reverence than her own people did.

‘Here,’ snapped the baby’s voice in her head. ‘Place me here.’

They were in front of a huge cactus plant.

And suddenly the plant was masked, masked by a column of blue light that touched the ground and the sky, thin roots of blue lightning snaking all around it. One of the roots touched the baby, which simply

vanished followed seconds later by the column, and the sky was dark again.

The ground was dark again.

And the spiders, the snakes and the bison lost their fear, their reverence.

As they closed in on the defenceless squaw, whose heart now beat faster than ever, she heard a voice in her head.

‘Remember this day, Leaf Snakeskin. This is your day. One day, you will create the Ini-Ma. You have been blessed.’

And she ran as fast as she could back to the tribe, back to the elders to accept her punishment.

But there was none. They didn’t understand her cries, her questions.

‘What son?’ asked Brave Bisoneye, pointing at her belly.

‘Is the day here now? Do you hope, like I do, for a brave, strong son?’ And Leaf Snakeskin suddenly realised her extended belly carried a child. Her time had not yet come.

22 July 1857

Los Angeles town

Lucy Addison was in trouble with the preacher. Again.

‘Young lady, you have the devil inside you, that’s my guess. Why else would you deface the Good Book this way?’

Who is Ini-Ma?’

But Lucy Addison had no answer for the preacher. She had no real recollection of why she had gone to Sunday School, picked up a pencil and a copy of the bible and written

‘My name is Ini-Ma’ in it. Or why she had defaced any of the other five bibles.

‘If your mama were alive now, she would despair,’ the preacher added.

If Lucy’s mama were alive now, Lucy probably wouldn’t be here, stuck

in this awful place with the other orphans.

Lucy's mama had been on a wagon train with papa and others who had eventually settled this town. But the Injuns had attacked and, as Silas Tanner had so charmingly put it, Lucy's mama had been captured and scalped. 'Only they didn't find no brains in there' Silas crowed.

But Lucy ignored Silas Tanner. She was far more interested in what the preacher and the other townsfolk had to say about her mama. 'They didn't touch her,' the preacher had said to the menfolk a few months ago. Lucy was believed to be asleep, but she had sneaked out of bed to listen. She knew, somehow, that they were talking about her family. 'They didn't lay their infidel hands upon her.' Which, Lucy knew, was very unusual. Most white women caught by the Injuns in the hills were raped and tortured before being scalped, and their bodies were thrown into the scrublands afterwards. But Lucy's mama had been killed and left alone. Lucy doubted she'd even been scalped – that was just Silas Tanner being evil. By all accounts, they killed mama and papa and then left the wagon train in a hurry.

'It was as if they were scared they'd done something wrong,' said Old Gus, who'd been one of the survivors of the massacre. 'As if when they killed the good woman Addison, they knew they'd made a mistake and ran.'

Which, whilst Lucy could take comfort in knowing her parents had died quickly, didn't alter the fact-that they were dead and she was stuck living with the other orphans in the preacher's poor-house.

But today, something was leading her astray. No, she had no idea why she had scribbled into the bibles a name she didn't know

So she ran from the angry preacher, ran out of Sunday School and into the streets. She ran past the saloon, past the marshall's office, past the general store where Silas Tanner's father sold goods to the townsfolk and people from neighbouring towns.

She found herself in the yard at the back of Tanner's store, breathing in deeply, crying silently. Ashamed and afraid.

Before her, from nowhere, came a bright blue light. At first it hovered in the air, like a shining jewel. She reached out, as if to touch it, but it changed, shifted, became a column of light about a foot wide and reaching up, up, up into the sky.

Surely the others would see it, come to investigate, chastise her for creating a beautiful blue column of light.

Tendrils of blue energy crackled around it and slowly but surely the shape of a man emerged from within it.

‘Papa?’

But no, this man was taller, slimmer than Papa had been.

This man was in shadow, the light behind him leaving only an outline that she could discern, his features cast into darkness.

He reached out to touch her and she could see the hand.

Thin, white, gnarled. She wanted to scream.

‘Are you Ini-Ma?’ he asked softly. But cold – the voice was so cold.

It was in her head she realised, the words were not spoken aloud.

‘N... no, sir...’ she stammered.

And suddenly her head was filled with visions, faces of women. Amongst them, an Injun squaw, a Mexican girl and an American woman a bit older than her mother. ‘Grandmama?’

‘No,’ the man said, ‘alas you are not the Ini-Ma. You are Lucille Mary Addison. Remember this day, Lucy. Remember this day.’

And the voice and the light and the column and the visions vanished.

‘Hey, Lucy, what you doing in my pa’s yard? You stealin’ things again?’

‘The blue light,’ Lucy said softly.

‘What blue light?’ asked Silas Tanner. ‘Preacher man’s a-lookin’ for you. Reckon I’ll tell him where y’are. Unless...

unless you wanna do me a favour?’

‘What’s that, Silas?’ she asked, suddenly afraid. Silas was five years older, than her, with a good strong body. And he had a look in his eye.

‘Think it’s time you grew up, little Lucy,’ said Silas, reaching out with one hand to pin both her wrists against the wall of the store, and undoing his fly button with the other. He smiled at her.

Suddenly, Lucy slipped her hands free and slapped them on to Silas’ temples.

The look of surprise on his face was pleasure enough but, to add to it, she whispered at him words she had never heard, words that popped into her head at the same time she was sure she heard a voice in the wind.

‘Is this her? No, not quite,’ the wind said.

‘Ini-Ma,’ was what Lucy spoke, for no reason she could guess at. A blue spark arced between her two palms, going through Silas Tanner’s skull.

Two minutes later Lucy Addison walked unscathed away from the Tanner’s yard, as if nothing had happened.

An hour later, Tanner senior found his seventeen-year-old son sitting cross-legged in the yard, head on one side, grinning. He was drawing circles in the dust with his forefinger, spittle seeping out of his mouth. He looked lazily up as his father approached. ‘Look, Pa,’ he slurred. ‘Look at the pretty circles... ‘ And he started giggling like a six-year-old.

Oh no, Lucy Addison wouldn’t forget this day. Ever.

22 July 1972

Downtown Los Angeles

Teddy was dead – and her only comfort was that, for him at least, it had been sudden and unknown. One moment they were crossing the street laughing and hugging, the next three guys, two black, one Hispanic, got out of a car and wordlessly slashed Teddy’s throat with a blade. Within three seconds they were back in their car, speeding away through the rest of the downtown traffic that pretended, through experience and fear, that it was best to ignore what it had witnessed.

For Lori, her world was finished. She and Teddy had been going steady since they both dropped out of high school, found Jerry Garcia, found rough sex and hard drugs and found love.

Or something approaching it.

Now Lori was in the 47th precinct, being ignored by the bad cop and sneered at by the other bad cop. Why were there no good cops in LA? Bad Cop One had grabbed her arm, jabbing with a pen at the recent injection marks on it. Bad Cop Two just flicked through the photos of Teddy's body, staring with grotesque intensity at the wound to his neck.

'Hey, who'd have thought kids on drugs had enough blood to lose anyway,' he said to no one in particular. Then he stared at Lori at last. 'You know, no one cares. About him. About you. About the punks that did this. Two junkies – one dies at the hands of dealers. Big friggin' deal, girl. He's no loss, no one gonna say they saw nothin', and you tell us the killers were blacks. Like they're gonna stand out in a downtown street.'

But Lori wanted justice. She wanted it very, very badly.

Not just Teddy's killers hunted down, but these men were supposed to uphold the law... Why were they being so damn judgmental?

'I don't do drugs no more,' she said. 'Both Teddy and I were coming down. That's why they killed him – to stop anyone else thinkin' about givin' up, dig?'

'No, Lori, we don't "dig",' said Bad Cop One. 'Truth is, we don't care much about Edward Berenwicz, we don't care about you and we don't care about the dealers. But our captain

– big guy who you saw earlier? – he cares about the mayor. He cares about the DA. So we have to go through pretendin' we care about you and your stiff of a boyfriend so we can fill out a few report sheets, add a few numbers to our statistics and find somethin' else for Perry Mason to do on a Saturday night.

Thing is, the three guys you say killed Teddy? Chances are, they're already dead. Or will be tonight. The gangs are gettin'

worse Lori. Kill or be killed is their motto, and I hope they wipe each other out.'

Bad Cop Two joined in. 'An' if a few junkie kids go down with them, kids like you, who's gonna give a stuff? Mom?

Pop? D'you even know where your folks are? 'Do they know about

you? Did Teddy have an apple-pie mom, and a white picket fence? You see, Lori, to us, you're all just ticks on a report sheet. You gave up the right to be treated as a human bein' when you started on the heroin. I suggest you get together whatever money you can and get the hell out of downtown, 'cos those boys know who you are and that you've been talkin' to us. I'd say your chances of livin' beyond tomorrow night are slim to none if you're not in the valley by then. *Capice?* '

Lori grabbed her bag and almost ran out, as far away as she could. She left the precinct and headed back to the room she and Teddy shared. Had shared.

For the first time, she saw it for the tip it was – used needles, spoons and candles everywhere. Decaying food, the smell of... of death all around.

She reached for a few clothes but then dropped them.

They, too, had the stench of death. Instead, she pocketed a small photograph of her and Teddy and fled. She had barely gone two blocks when a car slowed down beside her. The passenger window was wound down, and a lean, Hispanic pockmarked face leered out.

'Hey, Chiqua. Should no' go to da cops.' To underscore this, a flick knife popped open. 'We kinda let you go once, but hey, you let us down. Now get in.'

The rear door opened.

'Why?' said Lori.

'Cos you gonna die,' said a voice from inside. 'You come in with us, give us a good time, we make it quick, like ya boy.'

You refuse, we take you anyway but you die real, real slow.

Choice is yours.'

Lori started running, but she wasn't fit enough. Months of heroin, sleeplessness' and partying had screwed up her system and the Hispanic and two black men were on to her in seconds. They dragged her roughly into an alleyway between a couple of stores and the Hispanic ripped away her loose clothing, his eyes glinting in pleasure. He pressed against her –

she could feel his anticipation in so many ways – and his finger traced a line from her chest, down her stomach, down, down...

And her mind raced back to when she had been a child.

To when the bad thing had happened that made her run away from home. From her mom and from her dad and from everything she knew and loved. Everything she had never gone back to.

She remembered being fifteen. And Louis Meyerson from two blocks away pressing her against a wall like she was being pressed right now. Louis breathing on her face, bad salty-chip breath, telling her that the time had come. That what she had promised him when she was ten and he was twelve was due to him.

He'd taken her hand and pressed it against him, against his

–

And she had lashed out – in her mind.

'Shut your dirty mouth,' she had snapped. 'Shut up!'

And Louis had fallen back, fallen against the trash cans and the bike and the dog and... and...

And sat there, looking up at Lori in complete incomprehension.

She could see him trying to say something, trying to vocalise the sudden wash of new thoughts racing through his brain, but the ability was gone.

She had told him to shut up and he had. Permanently.

Instead of the smelly, lecherous youth with overactive hormones, there now sat a vegetable, a youngster sobbing yet making no sound, eyes wide and staring.

She had thought no one had seen them, but they had.

Louis' little brother had witnessed it all, and was very eager to tell everyone he had seen Lori hit his brother on the head and that was why he'd gone all funny now.

And, as she had left late at night to catch the bus into the city and vanish from sight, she was sure she had heard a voice in her head say. 'At last, this is the one. Ini-Ma is home!'

But it might just have been the wind whipping around her ears as she ran.

Now, faced with a similar situation, Lori couldn't summon up the past again, couldn't let herself go in case she hurt this evil man who was going to hurt her.

Or perhaps the drugs in her veins were stopping her.

Either way, Lori closed her eyes and prepared to scream.

Then she felt, and heard, a sudden rush of wind. It was as if a huge plughole had appeared at the end of the alley, sucking the air into it. She looked towards it, as did the three men.

A column of blue light had appeared from nowhere, just hovering in the alleyway, whipping up the trash and dirt. Blue crackles of electricity seemed to come from inside it, shooting out in all directions.

'*Chunuka kai wetz julatt*, ' said a male voice, but Lori could see no one. '*Tessi malun cylox bestai-wandoll?*'

And then, from within the blue light, a figure appeared.

Lori couldn't see its face. It was as if the figure was made entirely of shadow, except for two tiny red eyes that seemed to be taking in her situation.

The Hispanic lost any interest in Lori and instead threw his knife at the newcomer who caught it as if it were a newspaper, spun it and tossed it back.

The Hispanic died soundlessly, the knife embedded in his forehead, and toppled on to his back.

The two black men grabbed Lori. 'Come any closer, man, and she dies.'

Lori winced – a sudden stabbing pain went through her head, and vanished as quickly as it had come.

'The young lady is under my protection,' said the shadow man, his eyes darting back and forth between the men. 'You, however, serve no purpose. Like most of the people on this planet, you are worthless to me.' He closed his eyes. '*Lat-follu cylox taschmendt*,' he muttered.

Lori saw the two men fall before her, but they weren't dead. Instead they were thrashing about silently, doubled up in agony.

'They are reliving all the pain, all the terror and all the agony they have ever inflicted on a living creature, man or beast, during their worthless lives,' the shadow man said calmly. 'They are twenty-four and twenty-eight years of age,'

he added pointing to each one in turn. 'Both will live exactly forty more years, and twenty-four hours a day they will be in this much pain. Your primitive medical science will find no way to stop it, and I have protected their bodies so that no one else can ever kill or hurt them.' He bent over them. 'I know you can both hear me. You will be aware of everything for those forty years, but the pain you feel will ensure you can never speak again, never communicate to tell of your hurt.

Remember me always.' He stood up. 'What date is this?'

Lori stammered as she spoke, terrified of what the shadow man with the red eyes might do to her now. 'It's the twenty-second of July, sir.'

'Year?'

'1972.'

The shadow man reached out and touched Lori's hand.

'Remember this day, young human. Young Ini-Ma. It signifies the start of something wonderful for you. I will come back to find you. I cannot promise that your life will be any easier before I do, but I guarantee it will be perfect afterwards.

Remember me and the debt which you now owe to me.'

And he, the blue light and the wind were gone.

With a last look at the dead and tortured men on the ground, Lori found the ability to run.

5 April 1978

Oxford

Vice-Marshal Charles Dickinson's life had taken its first turn for the worse after the Second World War. By 1952, he'd been forced to leave the Royal Air Force – his tour of duty was up and the need for

experienced officers was low. The Nazi threat had been eliminated and the cold war with the Russkies was being fought by men in trilbies and trench coats rather than pips and Spitfires.

He and Eleanor had settled in the small hamlet of Oak Grove, near Oxford, in a large four-bedroomed manor house known as The Gables. After a few years travelling to and from the City, the vice-marshal had opted for the quieter life offered by a road haulage firm ten miles down the road. Emily had given birth to their first son, Philip, in 1954 but at the age of eight months he'd been found dead in his cot.

Eleanor was inconsolable, and the vice-marshal's second bad turn occurred when he'd tried his best to comfort her at the funeral in the village church. 'Come on, old girl,' he'd said. 'It's not as if he'd had a long life, gone to school, started to achieve his potential. We'll have another one.' He'd meant it as a rallying cry, a way to spur Elly on, make her realise that this wasn't the end of everything.

Perhaps it had been the wrong day to say it on, but it needed to be said. Elly needed to be encouraged pull herself together. There was the village to think about – the vice-marshal was on the parish council, and both he and Eleanor were members of the local amateur dramatic and choral societies and always organised the summer fêtes. It wouldn't be right for them to be seen to be weak.

Sure enough Eleanor soon gave birth to a second son, Justin, but this still didn't seem to make her happy. No matter what the vice-marshal did, she was still mourning their first-born. So the vice-marshal gave her up as a bad lot and put his efforts into raising Justin as a son should be raised. By the start of the 1960s the boy was just beginning school, and the vice-marshal wanted to make sure he was strong, a good lad.

Would play rugby, cricket and box for the prep school when he was older. Sure enough, Justin was accepted for Marlborough and, at his father's insistence, played sports, joined the local scouts and generally made the vice-marshal proud.

At eighteen, two things happened. Justin's mother died of some kind of haemorrhage – there was nothing that could be done. One day Eleanor Dickinson had a headache. By the afternoon it was a migraine and just before midnight she got out of bed, headed for the bathroom for a glass of water and, on the way back, stared at her husband, frowned and fell stone dead in front of him.

If he closed his eyes, he could still see the glass of water drop in slow motion, shattering and spilling over the floorboards.

Justin immediately announced he was following in his father's footsteps and joining the military, albeit the army rather than the air force. Still, with national service long since abandoned, Vice-Marshall Charles Dickinson (rtd) was delighted that his son had chosen this most noble of careers.

It wasn't long before, in the hot summer of 1977, Justin Dickinson came home on leave for a whole week, bursting to tell his father some news. He had been seconded to a special military and scientific unit connected with Europe and the whole United Nations. It was all very hush-hush and he hadn't really understood much about it, but he'd signed the Official Secrets Act. He explained that he was being sent off on some special training. That he would be abroad for a couple of months and that erratic postings at a moment's notice could follow. Before heading back to barracks he told his father that he didn't know when he'd next be home or even allowed to write. This was because of the nature of his new career, but he'd try and get in touch soon.

Vice-Marshall Dickinson saw his fine young son off at the end of August and, apart from a Christmas card from Egypt, he never saw or heard from him again. But he heard about him.

REGRET TO INFORM. PTE JUSTIN DICKINSON

MISSING PRESUMED KILLED IN ACTION. SINCERE

CONDOLENCES. FINE YOUNG SOLDIER. GREATLY

MISSED.

REGRETS LETHBRIDGE-STEWART, BRIGADIER,

REGIMENTAL C-O.

Now it was after the memorial service and Charles Dickinson was looking at the plaque attached to his wife's headstone.

There had not been a body to bury, or a uniform to press, or a rifle to fire.

Nothing.

The army had taken away his other son to join Eleanor and Philip and

there was nothing to remind him of Justin but some school photographs.

‘Terrible thing, Charles,’ the vicar had said after the service. ‘Terrible. But he died for his country.’ And he had led the way to the Clay Pigeon, where the landlord had laid on a spread in Justin’s honour. And, of course, the vice-marshal’s.

The vice-marshal had wanted to point out to the vicar that there was truly nothing brave or honourable about dying, for one’s country or anything else. Death was death, and he recalled how facile phrases like ‘but at least he died doing his duty’ had seemed in the many notes he’d written between 1941 and 1945, when this had been part of his job.

He remembered his words to Eleanor at Philip’s graveside, and finally understood her anger, her bitterness and her sheer impotent rage.

And as the villagers and friends went to their motor cars and bicycles and left him in the churchyard to be ‘private’, Charles Dickinson understood, for the first time ever, what it was to be alone.

4 May 1988

Reunion

Madagascar suddenly seemed very attractive – Henri had seemed so determined to take her there, and now she wished she had gone.

The orange flashing lights whirring silently on the steel corridor walls were driving her mad – Leon had managed to kill the blasted alarms, but not the emergency beacons.

She ran, full pelt, towards the medical room. If the base was compromised, it had to have started there. Chevalier and Du Pont must still be in there – they had to be.

A door juddered as she went past, causing her to stop suddenly. Was someone alive in communications? She shoved hard against the metal door and, with a creak and then a crash, it opened inwards.

Instantly her hand hit the emergency lighting – more blasted orange flickering lights, but it was better than the dark.

She wished she hadn’t. The communications room was littered with bodies. Eight, at least. She stepped back into the corridor, feeling bile

rise in her throat. An hour ago they'd been playing poker, losing francs like there was no tomorrow

–

Which there wasn't. Not for Belloq, Creme, Goddard and the others.

Merde! She carried on, but slowly, towards the medical room. She drew her revolver from under her lab coat, where her shoulder holster had remained untouched throughout the emergency. She weighed it in her hand, then slipped the safety catch off – blast regulations, this was so far out of the rule book... There was a bleep from the phone on the wall. She snatched at it, and snapped a curt 'What?'

'I can't raise base,' Leon said quietly. 'The lines are dead.'

'So's everyone in comms,' she replied. 'That's why you can't get through – your carrier isn't being transmitted.'

'No, I'm using the land line.'

'A telephone! Are you mad?'

Leon suddenly swore at her. Violently. Following it up with a tart 'I didn't insist we remain here, *Thérèse*.'

'That's Captain Gavalle to you, soldier,' she said.

Discipline was essential – without it, this disaster would get bigger. And Leon Jeczalik making unsecured phone calls was just the start. 'Leon, find everyone else and get to the Sea King. I'm going to medical, collecting anyone still alive there and I'll join you, OK?'

Leon grunted his affirmation and cut the call. *Thérèse* Gavalle exhaled slowly. Leon was all right, but prone to panic

– the young ones always were, particularly the eastern European ones. She stopped for a moment to consider. The Sea King helicopter was on the surface of the island, atop the base. The elevators weren't working, so Leon would have to take the stairs. H block was the nearest set to him – assuming he found anyone else alive, that's the way they'd go. She'd have about a minute in medical and then have to get any survivors up top via stairwell K – which meant they should all rendezvous up top at the same time.

Mind you, could Leon fly something as big as a Sea King?

Choppers were one thing, but a huge UN transporter was something else. Hell, she'd give it a go herself if need be.

Damn Leon. Damn everyone else. She knew the base should've been staffed by her hand-picked teams but, oh no, UN base commanders had to have their quotas of operatives from other nations.

A moment later she was outside the medical area. The red emergency lighting flooded with a low-level glow and she could see through the glass in the door that Chevalier was dead. He was lying on his back, sliced open from throat to groin, neatly and expertly. The red lighting disguised where the blood stopped and the floor began. Of Du Pont she could see nothing.

Cautiously, she eased the door open, ignoring the splash as she trod on the damp floor. Blood became sticky very quickly and each subsequent movement she made sounded to her like she was walking on bursting balloons.

'Du Pont?' she called softly. 'Rene?'

'He cannot hear you, *mon cher Capitaine*'

Therése pivoted round in a second, the revolver brought up in both hands with expert timing, her finger squeezing the trigger almost hard enough to fire, but not quite.

'I should have known you'd survive,' the voice continued smoothly. 'You are the most perfect specimen here.'

""Specimen"? I am not a specimen, I am a person.'

'Of course you are, *mon cher Capitaine*.'

She felt sweat on her forehead, dripping slowly down.

Getting towards her eyes, but she wouldn't blink. Wouldn't shake her head. She knew from their studies of this... this creature... that the slightest distraction and it would make its move. Just as it had with everyone else. 'I should shoot you dead where you sit, you bastard.'

'Please feel free to try. It won't hurt me.'

'Shut up,' she breathed.

'Go on. Fire.' The voice was hoarse, ragged, coming from behind her.

‘Shut up,’ she growled.

‘Fire, *Capitaine*. Fire at will.’ The voice shouted this time.

‘No.’

She remained calm until.’

‘Fire, you stupid bitch!’

It was a distraction she didn’t need, but instinct took over from sense. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. She lowered the gun a fraction as she turned to see Rene Du Pont, bleeding from a head injury and with his arm... well, his left arm missing. His face was contorted in anger – his lips moved ever slower, his voice coming out as a low roar.

‘For Christ’s sake fire!’

She began to turn back to the alien, her finger tightening on the trigger, but the creature had moved. Towards her.

One.

Two.

Three shots – one head, one chest, one crotch.

It didn’t flinch, just kept on coming.

And then she felt it touch her, five fingers on her face.

Again she fired. Point-blank range, blasting holes in its stomach.

But it was futile – whatever the alien was, it was impervious to bullets.

And the fingers touched. There was a flash behind her eyes, and she felt herself drop the gun. She was somehow aware of Du Pont staggering out of the room.

Perhaps he’d join Leon and anyone else at the Sea King.

Perhaps they’d escape and bring back whatever was needed to destroy this monster.

A monster they had sought out; a monster they had been sending

signals out to for decades now, since Telstar, Sputnik and all the others had first gone up. Mankind had sent out a message of peace, of invitation, of goodwill.

But the answer had come from this – and Therése Gavalle had been sent here to greet, study and report back on it.

Friend or foe.

Within eighteen minutes it had turned from friendly ET

into murderous ET. It had planned this all along and despite all her training, all her preparation with the UN and its various subentities which specialised in such things, she'd ignored the most important rule.

She had trusted their visitor because it looked human and smiled a lot.

And now she was going to die.

The last thing she felt/heard/saw was the alien inside her head.

'Thank you, Captain Gavalle. For everything. Oh yes, silly of me. There's a reason for all this. I need you to remember something very important. I need you to remember this word.

"Njah-Ma". Goodnight.'

And her world stopped.

Chapter Two

Rapt: In the Evening Air

Halcham, the Peak District

They were a strange lot, the villagers had decided a few months back.

Initially they were viewed with contempt and mistrust (a couple of the more vocal members of the parish council were even less than Christian in their appraisal, although that was nothing unusual for parish councils) but Reverend Cummings had talked his friends into giving them a chance.

Of course, it had taken a long time for the group to actually earn something approaching acceptance – and approval was still pie in the sky as far as some people were concerned. But that was to be

expected. Halcham was a small village. It sat at the tail of a very long winding road that ran down and away from the A34 between Manchester and Sheffield, neatly bisecting the Peaks.

Halcham was, quite literally, the end of the road. The village had been established hundreds of years ago around the now deserted cliff which had sheltered the rope manufacturers.

A massive cave – now one of Halcham’s tourist attractions –

had been hollowed out of the cliff face for the ropers to work in, sheltered from the harsh Derbyshire elements. And small cottages had gradually been constructed 276 feet below it, around the small river that threaded through most of the area and disappeared beneath the cliff and surrounding countryside.

Over the next couple of centuries, Halcham had gained more homes, a small dairy farm, a church and, finally, at the start of the current century, a school. Originally the village was just a Z-shaped roadway with cottages on either side, but as the Peaks became a tourist spot, a few had been converted.

Some into ye olde-worlde tea shoppes and others into purveyors of fine (meaning vastly overpriced) country apparel, and there was of course a pub every ten houses. A few of the more adventurous villagers had built a couple of new cottages on the other side of the river and some of these were now guesthouses. Halcham had a living population of about two hundred, which was good for the school, but many of the adults had to travel to Manchester or even Liverpool for work.

Halcham’s other tourist attraction was Halcham Fort, built during the thirteenth century. Little of it remained other than a tower and a few walls. The fort had been constructed on the same level as the cliff face and the fitter tourists would come down from exploring the cavern and walk up the same distance, but on the other side of the village, to the tower.

Strangely enough, the cliff and cave didn’t belong to the National Trust, English Heritage or even the Peak District Association. It was privately owned by the rich (in other words they didn’t actually live in Halcham) Malvern family, who tended to stay in their country house ten miles back towards the A34. It had been Silas Malvern who created the rope-manufacturing system back in 1864, and his great-great-grandson Miles who had finally closed it down in 1961.

The current head of the Malvern family was a recluse. No one had seen him for a couple of years, bar Reverend Cummings who had an audience with him every three months.

Sebastian, like all his forebears, had a long history with Halcham and, although not actually entitled by law, was considered by a majority of the villagers to be their squire. So when he let them know, via a letter posted outside the church, that he was allowing a group of friends to use the cave, and live in the small cottage that had been built close to its mouth, no one could really object.

There were many theories as to why he did this. Was the woman his illegitimate daughter? Or the man his bastard son?

Or was one of the ‘troubled’ young people they cared for a similarly embarrassing half-Malvern, half-barmaid from Wythenshawe?

No one quite knew how the group lived – yet they always had enough money to pay for the meagre food they bought in the tiny Wavy Line next to the Rope Walk Inn. There were five of them in total. The older pair – clearly twin brother and sister, with dark hair, piercing blue eyes, perfect skin and soft Irish accents – were in charge. The three teenagers (two boys, one girl) seemed to be unrelated to either the Irish twins or each other. They didn’t say much and once or twice it had been suggested that they were not ‘all there’. That concept had swiftly gone out of the window after Old Tommo, one of the curators of the fort, arrived at the Rope Walk one night saying how he’d engaged one of the lads in a long conversation about Brighton in Sussex.

‘Fond of the place, he was,’ Tommo told anyone who’d listen (most of the locals, but few others), ‘but seemed a bit unsure of himself. As if he’d forgotten great chunks of his life.’

‘Drugs then,’ decided Constable Watson. A couple of other people dismissed this.

‘Not like the junkies I’ve seen in the city,’ said Doctor Moulton. After the first few months the villagers began to warm to the strangers. This was helped no end by the fact that whenever there was an emergency in the village (a leaking roof, a schoolyard gate that needed a coat of paint or just a fence blown over in old Mrs Grimshaw’s back garden) the three youngsters would suddenly arrive and, almost silently, set about repairing the damage. They asked only for the necessary tools but nothing else. Mrs Grimshaw tried to pay one of the lads, whose

name she gathered was Ashley Moby, a couple of quid for getting her Ginger down from the big oak tree, but he seemed almost offended by this.

Miss Lewis in the post office spoke to the young woman one morning, and mentioned this fact. She merely looked embarrassed.

‘Is this something that worries the people of your village?’

she asked.

‘Not at all,’ Miss Lewis said. ‘But the youngsters have worked so hard and so well for us over... what’s it been now...

quite a few months? Well, we feel guilty.’

The woman looked a bit hesitant, but then said: ‘Guilt is something we all have to cope with. My brother and our...

charges have debts to repay. Please tell everyone to accept what we do as our... our...’

‘Absolution?’ Reverend Cummings had entered the post office.

‘Perhaps,’ said the woman. ‘All we ask is to be left alone, but also to be useful when the need arises.’

And with that, she left.

Miss Lewis shrugged. ‘Well, I suppose that explains that.’

But Reverend Cummings wasn’t so sure. ‘It still doesn’t tell us how they actually know when we need their help. Yet somehow, they always do.’

Miss Lewis merely shrugged once more. ‘None of our business, is it, Reverend. I think they’ve proved they’re friendly enough, if a little distant.’

But Reverend Cummings was not convinced. ‘There is something about them, Miss Lewis. Something around them.

They are... if it didn’t sound so silly, I’d say they were haunted by something.’

‘Well, they do say that the original Randolph Malvern’s ghost still walks the cave mouth.’

Reverend Cummings ignored her. 'Haunted not by someone but something. A past they don't want us to know. A past they don't want to face themselves, perhaps.' He took a deep breath. 'Maybe it's time I spoke to Sebastian Malvern and found out the truth.'

That had been three weeks ago. As Malvern had assured the vicar that the newcomers were indeed strange, but were honest and hard-working friends of his and nothing more, the villagers had got used to their presence.

The vicar was preparing his Sunday sermon, the last one before the New Year's Eve service, when he spotted the Irishman trudging through the snow. He was wearing only dark trousers and an open-necked shirt, yet seemed unconcerned by the snowflakes whipping around him, let alone the biting wind that caused this.

He entered the Rope Walk and the vicar grabbed his coat and scarf and hurried out to follow him in. Reverend Cummings simply couldn't think of a time when the Irishman had entered the village unaccompanied, let alone gone to the pub.

The vicar eased open the door to the pub and saw the Irishman standing a few feet from the bar counter, looking around as if unsure what to do.

Gary Rudge, the landlord, was a genial man who appreciated the fact that 'them strange lads' had helped drag his car from the ditch a few weeks ago after his wife, Dawn, had skidded on her way back from a supplies trip to Sheffield.

Dawn was shaken but unhurt, and within minutes of the screech of brakes the two lads had been helping Gary to get her out of the car and the car back to the pub.

Gary was surprised, not just at seeing the Irishman but also at the vicar appearing in the pub! 'Evening squire, can I help you?'

When the Irishman spoke it was with a very soft, almost musical, voice that sounded similar to his sister's, yet wasn't at all feminine or weak. Just, Reverend Cummings decided, beautiful. Almost angelic.

'I require... I would like to ask a favour. In a few days it will be New Year's Eve. We had a quiet Christmas to ourselves, but my sister and I wondered if we would be welcome to visit your pub on New Year's Eve.'

‘To welcome in the new year?’ Reverend Cummings could barely disguise his pleasure. How tremendously normal. He briefly flirted with inviting them to the church, but thought that was pushing it a bit.

‘Indeed, Reverend.’ The Irishman didn’t turn to face him, but still looked at Gary Rudge. He clenched and unclenched his left fist in a manner the vicar took to be a sign of nerves.

‘There may be a problem, however, so please say no if there is.’

‘Can’t see much of a problem so far, lad,’ said Gary.

‘Joe and Ash are over eighteen now, but Janine will not be eighteen until May. However, my sister and I feel it would be unfair to separate our... our grouping.’

Gary laughed. ‘It’s OK, lad. So long as she drinks coke or something soft, she’s quite welcome here. Probably be a bit of a party anyway. Be fun for ‘em. And if at midnight she wants a sip of champagne... well, I can’t see the reverend here or PC

Watson tossing my licence away. Not on New Year’s Eve, eh Vicar?’

‘I’d be a poor soul for this parish if I were to deny that, Gary.’

The Irishman did not seem to know what to do next, and had just started to say thank you when he remembered. ‘What time do the festivities commence?’

Gary shrugged. ‘We open at seven, close... well, we rarely close on New Year’s Eve. You lot just come down when you’re ready.’

The Irishman nodded politely, mumbled his thanks and headed for the door.

Reverend Cummings remembered his concern about the weather. ‘You’ve not got a coat, my boy? You’ll catch your death out there.’ He reached out to touch the man’s shirted arm, but made contact with his hand instead.

The Irishman whipped his hand back and hurried outside as if the harsh elements didn’t worry him in the slightest.

‘You all right, Reverend?’

Reverend Cummings was staring at his hand – at his fingers where

they had made contact with the man's arm.

Slowly he looked over at Gary Rudge. 'Cold. Completely cold.'

'Nasty nip out there –'

'No. No, I mean, his... his skin was cold. And hard. Like, well, it was like plastic!'

Chapter Three

That Was Close

Once more. Just once more was all it would take, and that would be that. Oh, certainly she was pleasant enough company, very intelligent and quick. And her enthusiasm couldn't be faulted, whether it was fighting off Vervoids, pan-dimensional terrorists, Chronovores or eighteen-foot Chiropterons (bearing in mind her bat-phobia, that was very brave indeed). But why, oh why, did she have to be a petite vegetarian health fanatic who wouldn't drink coffee?

Not that he drank coffee very often, but Mel's list of 'I don't's' was ridiculously long.

Trouble was, she was really rather sweet, inoffensive and, despite having a vocal range that would put Wagner's Valkyries out of work, fun to be around.

Most of the time.

The Doctor's few moments alone were abruptly interrupted when he heard the clackety-clack of Mel's small but powerful white stiletto boots on the TARDIS floor as she came up the corridor towards the console room.

The door was eased open with a noise that sounded like a sigh. The Doctor wasn't sure if that was the air-cushioned hinges or just the TARDIS expressing herself at Mel's arrival at the heart of the ship.

'I don't want to be a killjoy, Doctor,' she started, but before she could continue he turned to face her with what he hoped was his most pacifying smile.

'Then don't. Say nothing. Enjoy the serenity of the moment, Mel.'

'Doctor,' she replied in the tone of voice that let him know she knew he was joking. Even when he wasn't. 'Doctor, you remember that trip

to Australia we did the other day. Week.

Whenever?’

The Doctor nodded and breathed slowly. Suddenly, he knew what was coming next, and understood how Marie Antoinette must have felt as they led her to the guillotine.

‘And you remember that lovely car we hired? The one you told me you’d taken back to the Gold Coast? The Volkswagen.

Green, convertible, big headlights, dent in the offside wing?’

The Doctor tried to look stoic and to say nothing. ‘What of it?’ came out of his mouth, despite his brain being convinced it had sent no such instruction to his jaw.

‘I’m not sure what is worse, actually. The fact that it is parked in a huge oil-covered TARDIS bedroom. Or the fact that it now has a collapsible roof the same colours as your trousers. Or, indeed, the green sunstrip across the windscreen saying ‘The Doc’ on the driver’s side and ‘Companion of the Moment’ on the passenger side!’

The Doctor opted to look aghast. Shocked. Bewildered.

Confused even. Then he stared up at the ceiling of the console room and shook his fist. ‘Naughty TARDIS, I told you to drop it off in Australia. And as for those cosmetic changes...

naughty, naughty TARDIS!’

Mel clearly wasn’t falling for this. ‘Don’t blame the TARDIS! I’ve been around you quite some time now. I *know* you.’ She came up close to him, tiptoeing slightly as she brought her nose level with his chin and looked up into his oh-

(not)-so-innocent blue eyes. ‘You are a very bad man, Doctor.

B. A. D. We must take it back.’

‘Oh.’ The Doctor pouted at her. ‘Must we? Only it is lovely, and I thought it needed a good tinkering with. I used to be very good with cars. I haven’t owned a car in... well, a few bodies’ time. And anyway, you did say “I’d love a car like this”. I remember.’

‘So do I! Only the important phrase was “like this”. I didn’t say “this one” did I? Did I?’

‘No, Mel, you didn’t,’ the Doctor said with insincere contrition. ‘No you didn’t. At all.’

‘We must go back to Earth then. Take it home.’

‘Yes Mel.’

‘Now!’

‘Yes Mel.’

‘That’s that decided then.’ She reached up, tweaked his nose and walked out.

After a few seconds the Doctor let out a deep breath, pursed his lips and looked up again at the TARDIS ceiling, half-closing his eyes. ‘And you, you useless... whatever. You were supposed to keep the door to Master Bedroom 18 locked.

Or reconfigured even, so no one other than me would know there was a door there. Then she wouldn’t have found it and you wouldn’t be in trouble with her.’

The TARDIS lighting dimmed.

‘All right, we wouldn’t be in trouble with her.’

They dimmed further. He sighed. ‘All right, I wouldn’t be in trouble.’ The lights returned to normal.

The Doctor shuffled his feet sulkily. ‘Peri would have let me keep the car. Grant would’ve let me keep the car.’ He looked at the door Mel had gone out through and raised his voice a bit. ‘Evelyn would’ve let me keep the car!’ Then he smiled. ‘Actually, Evelyn would’ve kept the car herself, put in an automatic chocolate dispenser and a Teasmade! Mmmm...

chocolate...’

Mel suddenly bounced back in.

‘It’s gone!’

‘What’s gone?’

‘The car! The whole room... vanished. Or at least, the door into the room has.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Perhaps the TARDIS jettisoned that whole sector. Or perhaps the car was never there and you imagined it.’

‘You confirmed it was there, Doctor,’ said Mel, never one to let a point go missed.

‘Schroedinger’s Beetle, Mel. If you can’t see it, you don’t know it’s there.’

Mel snorted. ‘Nice try. What I do know is that the car isn’t at Bertie’s Rent-A-Bug just off Pacific Highway 1. And it should be.’

‘Right,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Right, fine, let’s go to Earth.

Let’s take the car back. And I’ll take up another hobby.’

Mel pointed to a white exercise bicycle covered in a dustsheet in the corner. ‘That was to be your hobby, if you recall?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘I leave the memory games to you, eidetic Mel.’

She broke into a smile, threw her arms around him and squeezed. ‘Oh keep the car then,’ she said. ‘If it makes you happy, it can’t really hurt. But I don’t approve of theft Doctor, and you’ll pay poor Bertie for his car, OK?’

The Doctor nodded happily. ‘Well, let’s get it over with.’

‘Where are we?’

‘Outside Bertie’s yard, just south of the Gold Coast, just after midnight local time. We’ll leave a cheque under the doormat.’

Mel brightened further. ‘Oh, can I sign it?’ Recently, on a visit to London in the 1920s, the Doctor had made Mel a cosignatory on his Coutts bank account. She hadn’t yet had a chance to flex her new-found power over the Doctor’s spending.

The Doctor nodded and opened the TARDIS door. ‘Pacific Ocean, here we come,’ he announced grandly. He stepped out into the dark.

And was greeted by car horns and brakes screeching, pouring rain and the midday gloom of London’s north circular road, just east of Wembley.

‘That’s not right,’ he muttered.

Mel groaned. ‘Oh Doctor... ‘

Chapter Four

To Add to the Confusion

29 December 1993

Gohnn, a state island of Micronesia

‘The dragon is a symbol, a guide, a path to a clearer life. This particular example is also very beautiful, yes?’

Shelly peered at the dragon. ‘Sure,’ she agreed slowly.

‘It’s cute.’

‘But it’s not what we’re here to see.’ Damien shuffled irritably, the camera on his shoulder seemingly getting heavier and heavier each second they delayed. ‘Can we get on, please?’ So far he’d missed Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas, and now New Year would be spent here. On some shoddy tropical island where the locals (he was, of course, thinking of those who lived a few miles away on other, populated, islands) survived by flogging coconuts and hessian skirts to Australia. Great.

The old albino gave the sort of insincere leer that is normally only used by politicians and guileless twenty-something film stars when they meet the newsmen and newswomen who hound them.

Like Damien.

Damien Braun was grateful the cameras weren’t actually recording anything. Their albino guide was not what his boss at KJLC-96 would call viewer-friendly. His teeth were yellow, his skin leathery and cracked around his mouth, and his red eyes were hidden behind ultraslim mirrored shades. His nose was crooked. There was a slight scar on his ‘rather pointed chin and what little hair he had sprouted upwards from the crown of his head for a few inches, and was then held in a thin white plume that cascaded down the back of his skull in a tight braid. He was dressed in a pristine white linen suit that had somehow avoided the lichen, dirt and green stains that had coated Shelly Kurtzmann and Damien during their trek. His hands were the same leathery pale skin, cracked and weedy, with bony fingers and nails that were seemingly filed to a pointed tip, about half an inch in length.

No, the albino was not a pretty sight even when he wasn't grinning. But when he was, it seemed as if he was party to some malevolent joke that only he understood. He tapped the ground with his black cane and the golden dragon carved on its top glinted in the sunlight that stabbed through the dense foliage, creating thin beams of light that flickered as the jungle steam wafted through them.

Shelly was operating in full reporter mode, oblivious to everything other than 'the story'. Damien sighed inwardly. All he wanted to do was get to the temple, record this 'lost civilisation' and its trappings and then get back to Los Angeles in time for the Emmys. Sod CNN and the rest, this story was going to get the two of them (oh yeah, and KJLC-96) fame, fortune and a regular contract for *Today* in the New Year.

Or Good Morning, America. Or...

'Mr Braun?'

The albino was still smiling as he inclined his head slowly towards the denser inner jungle. 'Shall we continue?'

Damien gave a terse smile back. 'Lead on, McDuff.'

The albino parted the nearest bush with his cane, with a strength and agility that Damien might have been forgiven for assuming he didn't have. 'Actually, that's a common misquote,' the albino began, but Damien opted to switch his brain into 'ignore boring old men' mode and concentrated on following Shelly's cute rear end into the undergrowth.

As he surged forward, he looked carefully around. Gohnn had sounded better than this when Shelly asked him to accompany her. 'A bit tropical' was all she'd said. Didn't mention the insects, the spiders, the bizarre birds and the lacerating bracken. Oh no, she avoided mentioning that.

Oh, and there was nothing in her brief about weird oriental albino guides who would treat them with the disdain the British royal family normally reserved for chimney sweeps and shoeshine boys. (One day he'd get to London and find out if there really were smog-filled streets, freeways into St Paul's and the Tower of London as well as chimney sweeps and shoeshine boys.)

All she'd said was that she'd received a tip-off over the wire that some locals on the island had uncovered a long-forgotten temple that could

be the missing link between the Mayans, the Atlanteans and the Ming dynasty. Or something.

Just the sort of crap Shelly loved. Probably a trap, or at least a joke set up by the guys at KLPQ-86. SO why the hell was he here, camera ready? Just in case, probably.

‘Yes, Mr Braun,’ came that wet voice from ahead, punctuated by stabs at the greenery with that blasted cane.

‘Why are you here?’

Damien froze. He stared ahead. The albino had turned back, leering again. He raised his cane – the dragon pointed straight at Damien’s heart.

‘Well?’

Damien couldn’t speak. How... how had he known...

Eventually his mouth clicked into gear. ‘You must’ve... been reading my mind... ‘

The albino nodded. ‘Obviously. It wasn’t difficult.’

Damien turned to see Shelly’s reaction, but she had been distracted by something else and clearly hadn’t heard their exchange.

‘Look,’ she hissed. ‘Daym, look there!’

Damien allowed his attention to wander, so persuasive was her voice.

And then he saw it – they were at the edge of a circular clearing that was so neat with such carefully laid out shrub-filled borders that it might have been the work of a Beverly Hills landscape gardener. ‘My God... ‘

‘Not quite,’ said the albino. ‘But mine, certainly.’ He pointed down the slight incline before them that led down into the area. ‘I believe this is what you wanted.’

Shelly was shaking her head. ‘It... it’s beautiful... ‘ Then she gasped. ‘But it’s in perfect condition.’ The temple was about fifty feet tall, oriental in style, three tiered, with canopies and lattice-work. But unlike those in Japan or China, this temple was made entirely of stone. And, Damien noted wryly, from this distance it looked like the stones had been seamed with real gold.

‘Brand-new,’ he breathed, then looked at their guide. ‘You knew, didn’t you? You knew all along where we were going, what we’d find.’

The albino shrugged, his aged face suddenly displaying no emotion, nothing at all. ‘You were brought here for a reason,’

was all he said.

Shelly was confused. ‘Brought here? But we sought you out! Hired you as our guide!’

‘I don’t think so, Shell,’ Damien said. ‘I think we were offered bait, the story of the season, and took it.’

‘Hook, line and sinker I believe you say,’ finished the albino. ‘Please go down.’

‘And if we refuse?’

The albino smiled again. It was not a pleasant, jocular smile.

Damien felt as if he were seeing their guide for the first time, sensing the intelligence and malevolence that had lured them to this place. ‘Then I shall need to find two replacements within less than forty-eight hours.’

‘Unlikely.’

‘Indeed. Therefore you will go to the temple, or you will die.’

Shelly looked angrily at him. ‘You can’t kill us. Everyone at home knows where we are.’

The albino stared through his reflective glasses in Damien’s direction. ‘I need you, Miss Kurtzmann. Mr Braun is surplus to requirements. Anyone can operate a camera and record the images I require broadcast.’

Damien snorted. ‘Everyone says that. I mean, why do people think it’s just a case of point ‘n’ press and, bang, you’ve got a newsreel? My job is pretty skilled y’know’

The albino nodded slowly. ‘Then it behoves you to prove that I need keep you both alive. Please. Let’s go down.’

With a glance back at Damien, Shelly led the way down through the shrubs towards the encirclement, with its glorious temple in the centre

glistering and glittering in the sudden sunlight.

29 December 1993

Auckland

Mike Dudley was sure he'd been followed. From Sydney.

He'd boarded the Air New Zealand flight two and a half hours ago, making sure he took a seat near the back that had not been assigned to him, and had appeared to be flicking through a Jeffrey Archer novel. He made sure it looked to all and sundry as though he was concentrating on the boardroom struggles between two siblings when he was in fact carefully observing every one who got on board after him, plus the cabin crew.

No one.

It didn't make sense.

Then, after the usual tedious announcements and a plastic cup of orange juice, the plane took off.

Still no one seemed to be tailing him or giving him furtive glances.

So he placed the book on his lap, settled back and closed his eyes...

'... bloody woman, why doesn't she stop moving about... '

'... I mean, how was I to know there'd be a delay?'

'... got 150 grams out of Bangkok, not far now... '

'... God, I fancy her... Wonder if she's ever done it in an aeroplane toilet?'

'... Hello Mr Dudley, how was the book... '

'... bloody things, never serve food on these bloody short hauls and I'm bloody starving... '

'... will I get the connection to Wellington or am I going to be stuck in Auckland. Again... '

'... never liked Jeffrey Archer myself, Mr Dudley.

Overwrought and too many adjectives. By the way, well done hiding

the gun... ‘

‘... New Year in New Zealand. Fantastic!’

Mike Dudley’s eyes opened suddenly and he stared around at his fellow passengers.

None of them gave any indication that they were aware their minds had been scanned, but one of them was playing a game with him.

‘See you later, Mr Dudley,’ the voice inside his head said.

Dudley could feel the smirk.

But there was no trace of gender. Of distance. Of personality.

Maybe he or she wasn’t on the plane? Or was one of the pilots?

‘Oh no, I’m here, Mr Dudley. If you want to play with the big boys, you ESPnets have an awful lot of ground to catch up.

See you when we land. Maybe.’

And Dudley grimaced suddenly as a stabbing pain shot through his brain, disorientating him, ensuring there was no way he could concentrate on picking up a trace.

He’d been mind-spiked.

That had been then, this was now. His mysterious fellow mind-reader had presumably gotten off the plane and disappeared into me murk, damp and neon-lit Auckland rush hour. Dudley had decided to carry on with his job, but his concentration was not as it should have been.

He was a trained ESPnet – no one should’ve been able to spike him that easily. Damn.

Of course the nightclub hadn’t opened for business yet –

but he wasn’t there for the punters. He was deliberately watching the pre-opening comings and goings.

It was 8.30 p.m. The darkness around the club was broken only by a streetlamp situated directly outside the big, black doors. So far a couple of bruisers, presumably bouncers, had arrived, and some gorgeous large-breasted women, probably hired for their looks rather than their brains. The equally typical faggot barmen turned up

moments later, and were quickly followed by some sharp-suited types with briefcases.

Probably full of Charlie, Es or some such.

Fine, let the punters kill themselves. And let Narcs deal with the repercussions. That wasn't what he was there for.

Wait! Yes, this was what he was waiting for. A dark four-door compact pulled up by the side entrance, blackened windows allowing no light in or out. A driver emerged and opened the back passenger seat, and the target was helped out, smiling broadly.

The light from the streetlamp glinted off his yellowing teeth and his leathery white skin. He wore ultraslim mirrored glasses which rested on a crooked nose, below which were his thin bloodless lips and a slight scar on his chin. His pure white hair sprouted upwards, held in a thin white plume that cascaded down the back of his skull in a tight braid. He was dressed in a pristine white linen suit and his bony hands carried an ebony cane with the dragon motif on the top.

Perfect.

Dudley closed his eyes and fixed his mind on an image of circuitry – dark green, with red and silver veins of microcabling threaded through it. Around it was an ethereal mist but his mind swam through that with ease, downloading on to the astral circuit board his memories and impressions of the albino he'd been sent here to observe.

After a few seconds, he received a mental confirmation that his communique had gotten through adequately.

He let his eyes open slowly and become reaccustomed to the dark.

The first thing he noticed was that the streetlamp had failed, leaving only a glow from the tiny windows on either side of the nightclub door to provide any illumination.

He also noted that the albino's car had gone – which was odd. He ought to have heard it going even when he was sending a message home.

'Check your watch, Mr Dudley. I know you set it to local time.' Something about that familiar voice in his head made him grow very cold. He did as he was bidden.

It was 3.55 a.m.

Less than thirty seconds ago, it had been 8.30ish.

‘Your call home seems have taken rather longer than you realised, Mr Dudley. Why is that, do you imagine?’

‘Who are you?’

Dudley didn’t bother with telepathy. His ‘friend’ was undoubtedly a TK10 or more – he’d be able to ‘hear’ by any means.

‘I’m your quarry, Mr ex-CIA man. I’m your target. Your enemy. I’m also your death.’

Without waiting for anything more, Mike Dudley took the Smith & Wesson from his belt and took off the safety catch.

Then he turned to walk away from the club, back towards the dim city glow.

Except there wasn’t any city glow.

Or trees.

Or road.

Just a blackness before him... to his left and right... and behind him. It moved, it pulsed like a giant amoeboid shape, surrounding him, forcing itself towards him.

Mike Dudley fired four shots into the nothingness before it enveloped him completely and then, as mysteriously as it had arrived, faded away leaving a closed-for-the-night nightclub in an empty street.

29 December 1993

Halcham

How long had it been since she had dreamt? Well over twenty years – she hadn’t had a dream since the day the cells in her body stopped ageing and dying. She hadn’t had a dream since that strange, thin pale young Englishman with the little facial scar had offered her and her brother the world on a plate.

She hadn’t dreamt since the day her humanity had been stripped away; slice by slice, scream by silent scream, until she had awoken in

that strange hospital in the Cheviot Hills, hidden from prying eyes.

‘Years ago,’ the pale-faced man with the scar had explained, ‘years ago, this was home to the British government’s grimmest secrets. Two world wars were fought here, secretly, away from prime ministers and kings. They called it the Bunker, a refuge for people and things “forged”

from mankind’s darkest desires and scientific aberrations.

Then, in the 1960s, it became home to the government’s newest version of black operations, C-19, and its more visible arm, UNIT. It is still the Bunker, but rejects from the “forge”

have given way to the spoils of UNIT. You two have become our first recipients of the technology that everyone should have, but which the weak-willed United Nations is scared to let them have. And in return, all you have to do is pledge your allegiance to me. Your allegiance and, of course, your conscience.’

Four years ago the pale-faced thin young man with the scar had finally died, obliterated along with the few remaining artefacts he had stolen from the Bunker after it been destroyed more than a decade earlier.

And thus she had been freed, from her obligation to him and her obedience to the dark side of her nature which he had exploited. Together with her brother, she had embarked on a quest for retribution. And forgiveness.

They had three young people to care for now – but what she really needed was a miracle. A way out for her, her brother and their charges. There was such a person, of course. Twice now, she had encountered him – as an enemy obviously. Her body had been programmed to detect his brainwaves, to know when he was nearby. But instead of following her orders to kill him, she would beg him for help. He was the only one.

And this morning she had awoken, realising that she had had a dream. A dream in which the Doctor had returned to Earth in his TARDIS.

Now, all she had to do was draw him here, by whatever means necessary.

The end would surely justify the means.

Wouldn't it?

29 December 1993

York

One day he would retire here. Frankly, if one was going to spend the rest of one's life in Great Britain, then surely there could be no better home than York. Glorious architecture, cheerful people, splendid views and a short drive in any direction took you into the most beautiful countryside, whether you went east towards Castle Howard, south-west towards Sheffield and the Peaks, or north into the Dales.

Whatever. One could feel complete here, feel relaxed as if life itself was patting one on the back and saying 'Jolly well done, old sport. You got this far, you deserve your rest.'

James Lanagan breathed in deeply, absorbing the marvellously cool Yorkshire air that whistled noisily around Clifford's Tower overlooking the calm but freezing Ouse as it twisted through the centre of the city. He had climbed the steps slowly – there were a lot of them – not wanting to look like anything other than a tourist.

'Any sign?' said a voice in his head.

Lanagan sighed, 'Wish you wouldn't do that, old man.

Gives a chap an awful fright, y'know.'

'Any sign of your target?' insisted the voice.

Lanagan nodded, despite the fact that the person he was talking to could not see him. 'He's standing on the bridge, just overlooking the car park. About nine hundred yards in front of me, but obviously I'm considerably higher up, He can't see me.'

Behind the quarry was the start of the city walls, the fabled walkway that surrounds two-thirds of York. If the man he was watching chose to go for a stroll up there, he'd be easy to trail.

Of course, if he stayed put it would be easier.

'What's he waiting for?'

'Haven't a clue, old man. I'm just watching him. Control told me nothing else about him.'

‘Describe him.’

Lanagan sighed again. Loudly. ‘Rest assured, it’s him.’

‘I need to be sure.’

‘He’s an elderly chap, albino by the look of it. He’s wearing sunglasses and a white, tight suit. Quite slim, long white hair, resting on a cane. Looks like a walking corpse if you ask me. And he... he... oh... ‘

‘What is it?’

Lanagan swallowed. ‘He’s waving.’

‘Who to?’

‘Er.. , me I think. He seems to know I’m here.’

‘Wave back.’

Lanagan waved. Sheepishly.

‘Use your camera, take a photo. Look like a bloody tourist!’

‘All right, all right, no need to take that tone.’ Lanagan fumbled in his satchel for a small camera, but by the time he’d found it and lifted it to his eye the bridge below was empty.

29 December 1993

Los Angeles

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Griffith Park Observatory.

Behind you, you will see the famous Hollywoodland sign, with its fifty-foot tall letters, now lacking the last four. To the right of that, beyond the park, you ‘can see the end of the San Fernando mountains, and beyond that is the 15 which, amongst other things, will take you to Disneyland. Should you wish to go. To the left of the sign, in front of the mountains, is Los Angeles itself. Follow that around and you come back here, where we’re standing overlooking the plush houses of Los Feliz. It’s a surprisingly warm day in LA, which explains why you can’t really see all that far. Normally you could see out to Los Angeles International Airport on the extreme right, and Long Beach extreme left. LA isn’t exactly proud of its pollution levels, but that thin strip of grey and orange haze you can see blocking our view is, indeed, years’ worth of car exhaust and other pollutants. Up here, however, the air is

cleaner and the view spectacular. Oh, and beware of rattlers.'

There was a mutter of alarm from the group listening to the aged albino guide. His pale skin was sheltered from the sun by a wide-brimmed white felt hat, his eyes were lost behind his dark glasses. He pointed each item of interest out with his cane, his long bony fingers shaking slightly each time he lifted it.

'My little joke,' he said, his voice so neutral that no one could tell if he was English, American or Asian. 'The rattlers are about six hundred yards behind you in the trail walks. And they'll only make their presence known if you go hunting around in the scrubland looking for them.' He smiled, displaying a row of yellowing teeth. 'So don't.' He lifted his cane once more and pointed to the green dome atop the white Art Deco building they were standing next to. 'Who wants to see the show?'

More mumbles from the group, this time of a more positive nature.

'OK folks, in we go.'

A door opened and people wandered in. The albino guide brought up the rear, making sure there were no stragglers.

Once in the darker, cooler space of the theatre he took off his hat and white jacket, revealing a pristine white shirt with a jade dragon emblem embroidered into the back – a symbol identical to the golden one on the top of his cane.

There was no one inside to greet the group, just rows of immaculate red plush seats that did not seem to have been sat in for some days. The guide clapped his small hands together and the sound echoed and was magnified in the splendid room which normally projected the stars and planets on to its ceiling to wow tourists.

The group immediately stopped talking and turned to face him. He pointed to a raised dais in the centre of the room, around which the seats were arranged in a circle. Everyone sat down quietly.

A blue column of what seemed to be gaseous fire suddenly roared into life. Although it touched the epicentres of the floor and ceiling, nothing was charred or even smoked. The lights went out and only the blue column of flame illuminated the members of the group. The albino stared at their eager, intense faces.

'My friends, you have been living for days, weeks, months

– some of you for years – on the streets of Los Angeles, a neglected, despised and abused subculture of our society. This is not what you wanted out of life, nor what you chose.

Circumstances put you there but now I have the means to take you away, to offer you – no, to give you – a new life. A new meaning. No, I'm not some do-gooder citizen offering a soup kitchen, nor am I connected to any weird church looking to take money you don't have or to some Beverly Hills women's institute trying to assuage their guilt. I am here with nothing more than a request to make of you. Do you want a better life?

A rumble went around his audience, and he held his hand up again.

'Which one of you is... ' He frowned, as if trying to bring a name to mind. 'Loretta van Cheaden?'

A grubby woman who was probably in her late thirties but looked twenty years older, slowly raised an arm dotted with injection scabs.

The albino reached out to her and beckoned with his head

– a minute movement that only Loretta herself noticed. She eased her way through the crowd and eventually stood before him.

He held her shoulders as if greeting a beloved niece or daughter-in-law. His benevolence towards her was almost palpable in the auditorium.

'Tell me, Loretta, what do the numbers seven, twenty-two and seventy-two mean to you? Any significance?'

Loretta's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak, but he placed a skeletal finger across her lips.

'Your reaction answers my question,' he beamed. 'Please stand here, ready to watch my ceremony.' She was placed next to the column of flame, but if she was afraid of being burnt she didn't show it.

The albino looked back at his other guests, who were beginning to mutter and chat as their attention span neared its natural end.

'I sense some of you are less than impressed, and that is fine. All I ask is that anyone who doesn't want to be part of my brave new world should leave now and return to the coach, where Willy will drive you back down to Sunset. I will count to thirty – after which, there's no

turning back.’ He lifted his arm dramatically, displaying a golden wristwatch which glittered as the blue light reflected off it.

A couple of women and an old African-American man got up immediately and headed towards the exit. A few seconds later two boys, no older than seventeen, followed them.

But that was it. The albino was left with an auditorium half-full with society’s forgotten dregs.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I give you your destiny.’

And the blue column of flame expanded, flowing over Loretta van Cheaden and the seated people before they could draw breath. As quickly, it retracted to the dais, but now the column was a small blue flame that barely reached the albino’s knee.

Of the Los Angeles homeless there was no sign, just immaculate red plush seats that appeared not have been sat in for some days.

Only Loretta was as before, standing still, a glazed, almost trance-like look, in her eyes.

Scooping up his hat and replacing his jacket, the albino opened the door and emerged into the harsh November Sunlight. Loretta followed at his heels as he clicked his fingers.

There was a coach in the otherwise deserted car park, and standing by its door was a rotund, olive-skinned American, his slim black moustache betraying his Puerto Rican origins, his open-necked Hawaiian shirt betraying his lack of style or finesse.

‘Most successful, Willy. A 90 per cent take-up.’

Willy laughed, boarded the coach and started the engine.

Once the albino and his new admirer had followed him inside, the doors closed and the coach eased away, preparing to head back down into the smog-filled city.

No one saw it leave. If they had, they might have been surprised to see that its departure revealed five huddled forms on the tarmac, each one with an unpleasant gash across its throat, their blood mingling in pools beside them.

One of them, a seventeen-year-old boy was still quivering slightly as

the last of his life oozed from the rough tear in his neck.

Then he was still.

Chapter Five

Eye of the Needle

29 December 1993

Halcham

His name was Mark Hambidge: He was a teacher in a small girls' school near Darlington in Durham. He was twenty-eight, married with a young son of two. His wife was Alyson, and she was a social worker. Mark was tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven, with thin metal-rimmed circular glasses and a slight scar under his lower lip. The area around his eyes suggested he laughed a lot.

Or cried.

But more likely the former – his face had that look about it.

He had been photographed alongside his wife six months ago by the *Yorkshire Post*. He'd won a national competition to identify six still images of festive television advertisements.

And his prize had been £5,000 and a year's supply of chocolate. The reporter had wondered what Mark would spend the money on.

My Brother's Death Was a Government Cover-Up was the headline. It transpired that four-and-a-half years previously Mark's brother Joseph had been killed in some bungled government operation to close down a terrorist organisation based in West Sussex. Mark had explained to the reporter that he and his parents had never had a satisfactory answer to their questions about Joseph's death, or been told why his brother had even been connected with the police investigation. Nor had a body been returned for burial. Mark Hambidge was proposing to use the money to fund a new helpline that would assist bereaved families to find out the truth behind the deaths of their loved ones in government 'incidents'.

That particular issue of the newspaper had been used to wrap some spare parts for the Halcham school heating system, which had been shipped over from Doncaster. The only reason the report of the interview with Mark Hambidge had been neatly torn out and

squirrelled away for posterity was because Mrs Morley at the school had cornered Ashley one afternoon when he was getting supplies from the Wavy Line.

‘I don’t suppose any of you know anything about heating systems?’ she had asked.

Ash had shrugged and said he’d find out.

When he returned to the cottage by the cavern mouth he mentioned this. Ciara and Cellian had instantly taken out their SéneNet-produced laptop computer with its state-of-the-art-plus serial port, modem and software and downloaded, from a site in Australia, the specifications of forty-eight possible heating systems of the sort the village school was likely to use.

Once the information had been burned on to a CD-ROM, again with technology that most of the population could only dream of, Ciara had asked who would do the job.

‘I will,’ he had said, pulling his right ear slightly forward and revealing a minute USB port embedded in his skull.

Without waiting, he plugged the CD-ROM’s lead into the port and Ciara activated the device, sending gigabytes of densely packed information straight into his brain.

Within eighty-three seconds, he was the western world’s authority on heating systems and set off down the cliff towards Mrs Morley’s tiny home.

He’d knocked on her door and tried his best to smile. To look as normal as he could. Ash and Janine were really good at it – they found the body language and chitchat far easier than he did. But then, he had gone through more trauma than they had. At least, that what’s Cellian had explained a year or so back when they moved on from their last base in Scotland.

But he wasn’t convinced. There was more to it than that. The others were more accepting of what had occurred four-and-a-half years back. For him, there was still something missing, something dark and nagging he could never identify, deep inside him.

‘Hello,’ Mrs Morley had said.

‘I’m here to have... have a bash at fixing the heating,’ he’d said, trying

to act relaxed and informal.

Mrs Morley had given him a huge cardboard box of stuff from Doncaster and escorted him to the school.

After showing him where the problem was she left him and, with almost autonomic actions, he began stripping the faulty system, rummaging in the box from Doncaster for replacement parts. To anyone watching, it would seem that he'd learnt about central heating years back rather than twenty minutes ago.

It was once he had finished and had begun clearing up that he noticed a sheet of newspaper in which a coil had been wrapped in for safety during transportation.

And seen the photograph.

And, for a reason he could never quite explain, he spent the next few minutes clutching the newspaper, sobbing out loud.

Luckily no one was about to hear him.

A slight twitching around the eyes reminded him that the download of information was breaking down – a warning that in fifteen minutes he would no longer know what a heating system looked like. Let alone how to disassemble a faulty one and install a new one guaranteed to work for eighteen years.

He had stuffed the sheet of newspaper into his jacket pocket, washed his hands and then returned to Mrs Morley's home to announce that the job was done. As usual, she had offered him tea and cakes. As usual, he declined and headed back to the cliff face.

But as he passed the little stream he'd stopped by the small water wheel and read the report that accompanied the photograph.

He had reread it a number of times over the next few months and now, as the New Year approached, he was overwhelmed by an urge to contact this Mark Hambidge.

He was thinking about this when Ciara came up behind him and touched his shoulder. 'Hey, it's time for –'

She stopped as she saw what he was reading. For a moment, he thought she would be angry, and demand to know where it had come from and why he was reading it.

But she didn't. She just sat on his bed and called for her twin brother. Cellian ambled in and she indicated the newspaper. Cellian took it, read it and shrugged.

'It was bound to happen sooner or later,' he said to her, then asked: 'And how long ago did you find this, Joe?'

Joe Hambidge shrugged. 'What does it mean?' he asked.

'Who is Mark Hambidge?'

Cellian sat down next to his sister. 'He's your brother, as I imagine you've worked out. He thinks you're dead. It seemed better to us at the time to let that lie exist.'

'Why?'

'Because we doubted that you, Ash or Janine would ever recover enough of your own memories or personalities to need histories.'

Ciara joined in. 'It was a risk we took.'

Joe was more confused than ever. Yes, he'd guessed Mark was his brother – there was a facial resemblance, Mark's apparently dead brother was Joe, and Joe himself had some memory of someone called Mark getting on a train to York, to go to university there. Years ago.

'But why can't I remember? Why can none of us remember our pasts?' he asked. 'And who took our lives away?'

Ciara closed her eyes and sighed. Cellian stood up. 'Gang meeting,' he said. 'Joe, get Ash and Janine. We'll talk downstairs in the dining room.'

But Joe pushed further. 'Who wiped my memory? Who wiped Ash's and Janine's memories?'

'We did,' Ciara said quietly. 'We are responsible for destroying your lives.'

29 December 1993

Paris

'The human memory is a curious thing, Dr Brel, don't you think?'

Dr Christophe Brel looked up from his computer and shrugged.

‘No,’ continued the questioner. ‘No, perhaps you don’t.

You see, I don’t believe anybody can truly appreciate what memory means, what it is, unless they have somehow lost it.

To lose one’s memory, Dr Brel, to lose one’s identity, is to lose purpose. All one’s life one struggles to better oneself, to further one’s career, care for one’s family, make money even.’

He sighed and paced back and forth behind Brel’s workstation.

‘And yet, my dear doctor, you know what they say: “He that wants money, means and content is without three good friends.” And one is so bereft of any friends these days that money seems an awfully good reason to do what one does.’

Brel sighed loudly. ‘Monsieur Doe, I am sorry but I find it most difficult to concentrate on the project while you are in this... this mood.’

Doe stopped pacing and instead stepped back, as if Brel had struck him. He was clearly shocked.

‘Dr Brel, my apologies,’ he said, somewhat theatrically. ‘I had no idea that I was causing a distraction. I shall retreat forthwith to my own small, grey office and continue with my work, leaving you to do yours.’

Brel quietly sighed with relief as the other man left the room then returned to the waveforms darting around his PC

monitor.

The corridors back to Doe’s office were as grey and featureless as every room in this part of the Network, uninspired and guaranteed to encourage a lack of imagination.

Which was probably the idea.

John Doe pushed his grey door open, slung his grey jacket over the back of his grey chair and placed a bright green mug of luke-warm tea on the grey desk.

‘Colour,’ he murmured, running his finger around the rim of the mug. ‘A piece of colour.’

Green was his favourite colour, he had decided. Of course, he had no

idea whether this was so, but he had made the decision a couple of weeks ago when the regulation grey mugs from the canteen began to grate on his nerves. So he had popped across to the far side of the Eiffel Tower where vendors sold rubbish knickknacks to gullible tourists and picked up a green mug with the tower on one side, the new defence arch on the other and *Vive le Difference!* between them in black script.

He sat in his chair and stared at his computer monitor. It wasn't on, of course, but it gave him a chance to stare at his reflection.

The face of a complete stranger stared back.

'Green,' he said slowly. 'Greeeeeeeen. Grngrngrn. Green.'

He shook his head, and his reflection followed suit. 'You haven't got a ruddy clue have you, my friend. Not one.'

His phone trilled once – an internal call – and he picked up the receiver. Hopefully, it would be something interesting to break the monotony of the day.

'Controller,' said a voice in a heavy French accent. He recognised it as belonging to Maurice Devin, the head of security. 'Controller, we have a problem down here. I think you should come down.'

'On my way, old chap, on my way.' Doe replaced the receiver and clicked his fingers. 'Success. The French have an emergency and need the good old Englishman to sort it out.'

Then he stopped. 'Score one for the away team!'

The Eurostar pulled in at the Gard du Nord at exactly 12.57

p.m., eight minutes late. For most of the passengers disembarking the delay was nothing, quite average. Some less than charitable types (usually Brits) would undoubtedly moan to the *chef du train* who would, naturally, mysteriously not know how to speak English despite having spoken last week with the same people, and with perfect pronunciation.

For one passenger, however, the delay was intolerable.

She was a slim, rather petite woman, dressed in a striking red Gaultier business jacket, tight black Gaultier pants and a dark grey Lacroix vest. Her shoes were flat, her hair cut boyishly short, and she wore

enough make-up to accentuate her stunningly beautiful cheek-bones and eyes, yet not enough to make her look over the top. If it hadn't been for her choice of designerwear, she might, ironically, have looked as much like a guerilla – her impeccable outfit mixed and matched with military precision – as a top businesswoman.

The *contrôleur des billets* smiled as she sashayed past him, and got a sardonic dismissive glance for his trouble. He shrugged.

‘*Putain,*’ he muttered.

Once past the multitudes swarming for the Metro the businesswoman managed to emerge at street level. The rain was pouring down, just as it had been at Waterloo, and she was being jostled by Parisians running for cover along rue de Dunkerque.

She glanced around, looking for Georges. He was supposed to be collecting her, and it was unusual for him to be late. Or lost. They had definitely agreed to meet by the Metro entrance. Unless he'd given up and gone to their alternative rendezvous. It looked like it would be a taxi ride...

‘*Bonjour, Mademoiselle. Bienvenue à Paris.*’ The speaker was not Georges.

It was a tall, muscular woman in her late twenties, wearing jeans and a sleeveless Bastille Day T-shirt that instantly identified her as a foreigner. Her right shoulder was tattooed with the symbol of female fertility and her head was shaved, apart from a long black pigtail that hung from above her left ear down to her waist.

‘*Merci. Et vous êtes?*’

‘*Votre guide, Mademoiselle. Je vous accompagnerai jusqu'aux catacombes. Par la suite, Monsieur Doe lui-même vous conduira au Network. On est un peu en retard, je pense –*

les Britanniques ne savent pas mettre en service ces nouveaux trains afin qu'ils arrivent à l'heure’

The businesswoman regarded her escort with obvious disdain. She had little time for the hired help.

‘*Vous parlez très bien le français. Ça 'impressionne,'* she said rather abruptly, more to pass the time than to inspire a conversation.

The pigtailed tall woman indicated a small lime-green Fiat X-15 parked opposite.

‘ Merci du compliment,’ she said, leading the way over to it, and unlocking the passenger door. The businesswoman passed her attaché case to her.

‘ Cepenaent, j’ai besoin de pratiquer mon anglais. Il faut que ça soit parfait très bientôt. Pour l’instant on parle en anglais, d’accord?’

The pigtailed woman got in beside her, frowning. Her grasp of French wasn’t that good after all!

‘ Pardon, mon Capitaine?’

The businesswoman sighed. ‘I said, I need to practise my English. I shall need it to be perfect very soon. So, from here on we will talk in English, is that understood?’ To anyone listening, this would have sounded ridiculous as only the most expert linguist could have detected any hint of a French accent in her voice. She seemed to speak English as if she was born and bred in the home counties around London.

‘Absolutely, Captain.’

The car shot away at some speed, U-turned neatly and headed towards the south-west of the city before any more conversation could take place.

They took an unusual route through Paris to avoid the congestion along boulevard de Strasbourg, which would be overrun with lunchtime drivers. They cut up past the Poissonniere, around the back of Les Halles, down past the rear of the Louvre and then left on rue de Rivoli on to the quayside, crossing the Seine at Pont Royal, alongside the Musée D’Orsay.

‘Scared we’re being followed?’ asked the businesswoman, but the driver just smiled enigmatically.

‘Or are we too early?’

The driver nodded. ‘My orders were to get you there by one, Captain,’ she said.

‘Don’t call me “Captain”,’ snapped her passenger.

They continued the journey in silence, except when a Citroen pulled out of a side turning on to boulevard Raspail, directly in their path. The businesswoman's driver was still swearing in French, English and something suspiciously Scandinavian as they passed the Montparnasse cemetery, Napoleon's gift to the left bank of Paris, where the likes of Sartre and army martyr Dreyfus were interred. Finally, they pulled up alongside a row of small cafés and parked. Without speaking, they left the vehicle and walked towards the Place Denfert Rochereau, where a queue had formed before a small dark entrance hidden behind a tiny patch of green. The catacombs.

The businesswoman's guide casually ignored the mutters and stares of the people in the queue and led her to the main entrance where, without paying (or being challenged, interestingly enough) they entered.

The catacombs were accessed via a long flight of stairs beneath the city streets. They had been constructed parallel with the sewers a couple of centuries earlier as a repository for bodies that were disturbed when buildings were erected on cemeteries. After the French Revolution they became famous as the last resting place of many of Madame Guillotine's victims, which explained why the gloomy tunnels contained more skulls than complete skeletal bodies per square yard.

Piled one atop another, the remains were now an eerie collection of perfectly preserved bones – a macabre tour of France's darkest moments – kept behind prison-style black bars, just out of reach of eager relic-hunters or the chocolate-stained hands of American children.

There were tourists from both France and abroad, some listening to guides, a couple from England using the specially prepared foreign-language version on a cassette, and a family of Germans happily wandering around by themselves.

Few people glanced at either the small, attractive businesswoman or her tall, Amazon-like companion with her only hair braided in a long pigtail. Nor did anyone seem particularly surprised when halfway through the tour, as the trail led around some alcoves and pillars, the duo seemed to vanish.

The pigtailed woman had been tapping the odd skull as they walked, but her companion could not fathom a reason or a system as to why she did so. Finally, she leant through some bars separating the tourists

from a pile of skulls that were part of complete skeletons, and therefore kept safe from damage, and pressed one of the skulls that was a lighter colour than the rest. To the untrained eye, it was just another skull. To those in the know, it was a trigger that began to activate a door further back down the way they had come. The door looked like the entrance to a storeroom, and people assumed it contained brooms and spare light bulbs and was presumably opened by a janitor's key.

It was something very different.

The two women had thirty seconds to get back to the door, push it open and go into the cupboard-sized blackness. As the outer door shut behind them with a clunk, a pencil-thin beam of amber light scanned them horizontally, down then back up, stopping at the pigtailed woman's eye height.

After a few more seconds, the ground below them juddered enough to indicate that they were in an elevator going a long way down. After a further few seconds, a door in front of them slid upwards and they stepped into something very different indeed.

They were now at the main entrance to the Network, standing at the top of a flight of steel stairs that led down into the atrium of a three-storey complex. All the walls and floors they could see were either glass or strengthened transparent plastic – the only things that broke the view were steel supports that linked the walls or acted as banisters on the various stairways. On the furthest side, one level below, was another entrance.

Before the women could move, three men ran over from a room and ran metal detectors over both of them, ignoring the affirmative bleep from the one scanning the pigtailed woman (presumably her well-concealed firearm – if that's what it was

– was OK).

Then a man pressed a swab against the back of the businesswoman's neck and, before she could react, had jabbed her with something.

'DNA,' the pigtailed woman murmured.

'*Assurée*,' said one of the men, indicating they should proceed into the Network complex.

The pigtailed woman walked quickly down the steps, but her

companion was less confident – walking on transparent surfaces is actually quite alarming as you can't quite see where you are going. The human eye guides the brain where to walk, using colour, structure, etc as reference points so you don't have to stare at your feet whilst moving. But when everything is see through, with just reflective pillars to break things up a little, the brain becomes confused.

The pigtailed woman realised that the woman she was escorting was having a problem adjusting, and waited patiently for her in a room on the floor below.

The businesswoman tried to get to her, but found herself in a glass office directly above. She looked through the floor and shrugged helplessly. The pigtailed woman smiled, not unkindly, and walked around the room she was in, her finger just touching the ceiling, so that the businesswoman could see the route she should take. Within a few seconds she was at a set of steps, which she descended gingerly, and then was once again standing beside her escort.

They were now next to the entrance that was a level down from the main floor. The pigtailed woman tapped a code on to a small keyboard, and the door opened with a hydraulic sigh.

They entered what was a far more traditional corridor –

carpeted, with framed posters of Bastille bars and shows at various Parisian theatres. Another door brought them into another cavernous area, again all transparent surfaces and steel supports.

But this time it was on one storey and was just a series of small rooms occupied by white-coated scientists, with a few black-clad, reflective-visored commandos with vicious snub-nosed automatic pistols keeping watch. The newcomer looked through an arched entrance way. This opened on to a small control room, at the centre of which was an enclosed but transparent domed area. What appeared to be eight coffins were arranged like flower petals around a central metallic plinth dotted with monitors, controls, etc.

The pigtailed woman tapped her companion's shoulder, and they left this intriguing place and returned to the corridor.

To the right was an elevator door, and when the businesswoman looked up she realised that they were actually inside an open-topped area with nothing but a plate-glass observation deck thirty feet up, through which she could make out a few heads.

A voice suddenly rang out and she noticed that tiny transparent grilles, with fibre-optic cables, were attached to the walls.

‘Captain Therése Gavalle,’ said a very cultured English voice. ‘Jolly decent of you to come and visit us. Please join me up here – Ms de Meanour will escort you.’

The pigtailed woman smiled at Gavalle and pointed at the elevator.

With a long exhalation of breath, Gavalle shook her head in resignation and allowed de Meanour to lead her over.

They got into the elevator and were immediately plunged into darkness until they emerged into a brightly lit suite of traditional offices, populated by terribly normal-looking men and women who could have been working in a law or accountancy firm. The walls were painted grey, the carpet was grey – everything was a dull contrast to the James Bondian rooms far below.

Ms de Meanour tapped on an office door marked ‘J Doe.

Project Controller’ and the English voice yelled ‘Come in’

with a marked air of pomposity.

If Gavalle was expecting the sort of stuffed-shirt ex-army colonel the tone of voice and old-school vocabulary had suggested, she was wrong, and she didn’t hide her surprise terribly well.

John Doe was in his late thirties, his slightly weasel-like face topped by thinning black hair. He had a mole on his left cheek which looked like someone had jabbed him with a marker pen but, other than that, he looked like any man in the street. He was wearing a grey suit, grey shirt and grey tie, but held a lime-green mug of tea or coffee in his left hand. His right hand was holding a very small mobile phone that had to be a child’s toy.

He followed Gavalle’s gaze, and as he pointed her towards a comfortable grey armchair next to a grey bookcase he tapped the phone on his desk.

‘Nokia. Will hit the market in a couple of years once they’ve ironed out the kinks and made it affordable by you and me. Well, you. I’ve got three of them. Would you like one?’

The bill will come here, no need for you to worry. And yes, it’s

boosted to work down here. And even down there,’ Doe said, clearly meaning the glass complex beneath them.

‘Why am I here?’ asked Gavalle.

Doe smiled. He was like an excitable English schoolboy, she thought. Everything she said seemed to amuse him, delight him and make him grin.

‘I say, didn’t the letter explain all that?’

‘You know very well it didn’t,’ she snapped. ‘Monsieur Doe, I am not used to being dragged halfway across the world to go into cloak-and-dagger catacombs with... ‘ she looked at Ms de Meanour frostily. ‘With bizarre henchwomen and end up somewhere out of a bad *Superman* comic book.’

Doe shrugged. ‘You will come to understand, Captain, just why my security is so tight.’

Gavalle pouted. ‘Tight? The metaphorical camel could’ve got where he wanted easier than we got in here.’

Doe nodded. ‘And I apologise.’ He paused, then clapped his hands. ‘Although it’s jolly rum, don’t you think? You, a charming French lady living in England, coming home for the first time in three years to meet me, an English gentleman, resident in Paris because he can’t go home.’

‘Why not?’

‘Where would I go, Captain?’

‘I’m not in the service any longer, monsieur.’

‘Oh tosh, Captain. Once a UN operative, always a UN operative, that’s what they told me.’

‘Who told you?’

He shrugged. ‘No idea, can’t remember.’

‘Really?’ Gavalle wondered whether Doe was mad.

As if anticipating her thought, he shook his head. ‘No, I’m not delusional. You, of all people, should know about things like that.’

‘*Moi, qui?*’

Doe raised an eyebrow.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to alarm you.’

Gavalle frowned. ‘I mean, why should I know about “such things”?’

Doe opened his desk drawer and took out a file. He tossed it over to her and she opened it.

Staring back at her was a photograph of Captain Thérèse Gavalle, circa 1988.

‘Born in 1961 in Lyon. An only child, your parents died in a fire at a cinema complex when you were twelve. You emerged from school the best in your year, and sought a career in the military. However, you started off as a police officer until you were unexpectedly seconded from the gendarmerie in 1985 to work as a *disponible* for the United Nations. You worked your way through the UN military covert operations until 1988. However, the military life, and the UN’s politics, both local and international, weren’t for you and you became vocally... awkward. A maverick. *Le coquin* they called you.

‘In November 1987 you were attached to a United Nations military/scientific task force whose remit was... open-ended to say the least. In March 1988, you headed up the military division in the UN complex on Reunion, where an alien had been kept for twelve months. On 5 May, UN forces arrived on Reunion to discover the creature had escaped. Eight survivors told them what had happened, and how you had held the creature at bay until they were safely at the helicopter pad.

Sadly, there was no helicopter but they survived by making bivouacs in the surrounding forest. Of you and the alien there was no trace. And then, about two years ago, on 4 May 1991, you appeared again, at Nice airport, getting a flight to Switzerland. You were met in Zurich by a British army general and your past was explained to you. You couldn’t then, and still cannot, explain where you were for two years, or why so much of your past is a blank. But your passport photograph registered on various Interpol computers and they tracked you down.

‘You were a very valuable commodity, Thérèse. You’d had contact with aliens, possibly been off-world. They needed to know. Sadly for them, and luckily for you, they realised that you genuinely knew nothing bar your name, and that the last thing you remembered was

the alien attacking your friend Rene Du Pont on Reunion. You signed the UN's *traité du silence* again and were given a new home in London, where you've been working as a translator for a publisher. How are Tintin, Asterix, Lucky Luke and all the others these days? I haven't read them for years— no idea what I've missed actually.'

Gavelle tossed the file back on to the table.

'So?'

'And this morning, before coming here, so settled were you with your new existence you even signed up for a pension policy with... ' he took a fax from his jacket's inside pocket

'Horn Independent Financial Advisors. How sweet. How domestic. Oh, how delightfully normal.' He scrunched the fax up and threw it expertly into the waste bin on the other side of the office.

Gavalie continued. 'What do you want with me?'

Doe smiled, and for the first time Gavalie saw something behind the smile. This man had a secret of his own, and she knew that whatever he said next there was no way it would be the whole story.

'I want to employ you. Or rather, my employers want to employ you.'

'The United Nations, I take it. This place stinks of them.'

He shook his head. 'However, 90 per cent of those working here believe this is either a UN operation or at least part of the French government. And we are using the old wartime bunkers. Makes Winston Churchill's war rooms look like a boot cupboard, don't you think?' He replaced the file in his draw. 'Coffee? Tea?'

Gavalie said nothing.

'Oh well, suit yourself.' He got up and flicked on a small kettle that sat on the bookcase. 'I'm going to offer you a job.

Eight hundred thousand francs up front, same again when the project is over.'

'When's that?'

'Less than a year, I hope.'

'What is it?'

Doe shook his head as he made himself a new mug of tea.

‘I can’t tell you unless you sign up. Bit awkward I know, but gosh, the money’s a good incentive. And I imagine you are rather bored with rich Belgian cartoonists, the English rain and cold, tasteless croissants from a greasy spoon in Holborn.’

‘I need something.’

‘It’s secret, it’s unusual, it’s scary and it’ll destroy the UN, their secret armies, their cash-in-the-back-pocket politicians and, if there’s any true justice in the world, no one will need to sit through the Eurovision Song Contest ever again. Enough?’

Gavalie pretended to be considering the offer, although she had made up her mind before leaving Waterloo.

‘Where’s Georges?’ she asked suddenly.

Doe looked at Ms de Meanour questioningly.

‘Her friend. She arranged for him to meet her at Gard du Nord.’

Doe frowned. ‘We did say that wasn’t necessary in the letter, Thérèse.’

‘Georges Daspard is the only friend I have in Paris. I wanted to see him.’

‘Why?’

‘So that he knew I was here. So that if I disappeared again, someone would know where I had last been.’

Again Doe looked at de Meanour.

She shrugged. ‘He’s probably still in the top floor café at the Centre Pompidou. After all, that’s where he thought you were meeting if you missed each other at the railway station.

Now maybe he’s assumed you weren’t coming and gone home.’

Gavalie frowned. ‘But I told him... ‘

‘We anticipated that,’ said Ms de Meanour. ‘We left a message on his answerphone from your “secretary” telling him of the change in plans. Should we bring him here?’

‘No,’ Gavalie said quickly. ‘No, Georges mustn’t know about this. I don’t want him to be in any danger from the UN.’

He has a wife and two sons. I’ll call him later and apologise.’

Doe considered this. ‘If you’re sure... ?’

Gavalie nodded. ‘Where do I sign up?’

Doe clapped his hands. ‘Splendid,’ he said. ‘Ruddy splendid.’

‘One question,’ said Gavalie, as casually as she could, as she got her pen out. ‘Why me?’

‘My employers took you on my recommendation after perusing that file.’

‘And you?’

Doe sat again and sipped his tea, placing the newly signed contract in the same drawer as Gavalie’s file. ‘As you may have guessed from my name, Thérèse, I, too, have lost my memory. I have no past, no roots, nothing. I must have had some involvement with the UN, because I remember odd things I’ve heard but, like a dream after you’ve just awoken, they’re frustratingly out of reach and fade very rapidly. The aliens, you see, did a better job on me. But I’m hoping you will remember using our facilities here. And then, if you do, you can help me find the aliens and I can do something about getting my existence back.’

‘And if they won’t give them back? Or can’t?’

‘I’m a man with no past. No standing. Do I have a wife? A child, a son or two like your chum Georges? Who knows? As it stands, I don’t own anything that I can truly call my own.’

Captain Gavalie, I’m effectively a dead man. If the aliens won’t help, I shall destroy them and, if necessary, die with them.’

And Gavalie realised she’d just signed a pact with a very dangerous man.

God knew what his superiors must be like.

At exactly the same moment that Thérèse Gavalie had entered the first elevator behind the secret door in the catacombs, a priest at Sacré-Coeur was tugging open the door of a confession box.

Instead of the prayer book he was expecting to find a body flopped out, its neck broken, according to the local coroner, by one expert blow to the throat.

An hour afterwards, as the body was being loaded into a black van to be driven away for identification and an autopsy, a police inspector went through the dead man's jacket and found an address. 'Time to pay Madame Daspard a visit and tell her she's become a widow,' he muttered to his constable.

He noted the time of death. 'Poor man's been dead since about midday.'

A group of people had gathered to watch at the foot of the wonderful cathedral, some on the roadway, some on the raised concrete area that was the Willette square. A number of local Catholics were crossing themselves, sending the departed off with a prayer.

Amongst the crowd was a very tall, muscular woman in her late twenties, with closely cropped dyed blonde hair wearing jeans and a sleeveless Bastille Day T-shirt. Someone particularly observant might have noticed that her left shoulder was tattooed with the symbol of female fertility but everyone was too busy gawping at the police, dead bodies under blankets, and horrified clerics trying to avoid the local news reporters.

With a smile, the blonde Amazon walked through the crowd and back to the Metro.

Chapter Six

Why Me?

Melanie Jane Bush stabbed at her spaghetti with all the enthusiasm the spaghetti probably felt at being stabbed. Less even.

She and the Doctor were sitting in the restaurant at Ikea, a huge 'home furnishing' store in Wembley, slowly munching their way through an expensive couple of cold pasta salads.

'Mel? Mel, can't I have some meat? Just a slice of ham, or a bit of chicken breast, just to offset the... well, taste is too strong a word, the flavour of this delightful pile of green, red and curly brown bits?' The Doctor, Mel had discovered very early on, was not a fan of vegetarian food. Oh, he said he was a vegetarian sometimes, when it suited him.

Just not today.

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’ the Doctor asked in a way that suggested he generally got his own way.

‘Because I said so,’ Mel muttered, in a way that suggested she always got hers.

The Doctor went very quiet and continued nibbling his salad. ‘Mel, I’ll ask it again. Do I look like a rabbit?’

Mel sighed and looked at him. ‘It’s only bec–’

The Doctor was silently mouthing along with her ‘–cause I care.’ He grinned and took her tiny hands in his. ‘I know you do. And I appreciate it no end. But just once, especially here on this lovely planet in this lovely era, I’d like to savour some of the local delicacies rather than just the root vegetables.’

Mel laughed. ‘Oh all right then. Such as?’

The Doctor’s eyes glinted as he glanced over at the kitchen area. Mel followed his gaze – and could see he had settled on an admittedly rather scrummy-looking treacle pie with custard.

‘Please?’

Mel nodded, and before her head had reached its second nod the Doctor was moving towards the counter. She sighed and went back to her salad and carrot soup. One day, she’d win...

The Doctor paid for his treacle pie and, just as he was about to head back to his companion, he saw out of the corner of his eye a tabloid newspaper abandoned on a seat. He scooped it up and, putting his pudding down on a table, began flicking through it. Nothing actually struck him as wrong, and yet...

He looked again at the front page, folding it in half so that all he could see was the bit that had attracted him in the first place.

The date was 29 December – preparations were under way for the

New Year celebrations in Trafalgar Square, the underground trains were threatening not to run and the buses were being sponsored by a lager company. Politicians were arguing, two soap-opera stars were having an affair, and a man in Southport had a hamster that could walk backwards.

Then he spotted it – a tiny opening paragraph that continued on page four.

WOMAN WINS PRIZE FOR CAKE

He took a deep breath and opened the relevant page, fearing the worst.

And he wasn't disappointed. Or rather, he was. Very disappointed.

'Oh no,' he said quietly. The story was that a woman from Norfolk had entered a national television competition to guess a famous TV chef's favourite cake recipe. The one who came closest would appear in the chef's next summer collection *and* win £10,000 prize money.

Shoving the paper in his pocket and leaving his treacle pudding untouched, the Doctor stomped out of the restaurant, muttering 'We're leaving' to a bemused Mel.

Eager not to be abandoned in Wembley, she ran after him, asking him to wait for her.

He didn't, and she had barely caught up with his coat-tails by the time he reached the traffic-congested north circular road outside IKEA.

'Care to tell me what's going on?'

The Doctor passed her the newspaper, jabbing at the cake recipe story.

'Your recipe? Someone's ripped you off?'

'No Mel,' he said as they reached the police box parked dangerously close to the Pitfield Way turn-off. 'Someone has ripped off time. And they are in trouble as a result.'

Mel's eyes widened. 'That sounds serious.'

'Serious? Serious! It's more than serious, Melanie. It's catastrophic. It's appalling. It's irresponsible.'

Mel nodded, trying to look understanding as the Doctor vanished

inside the TARDIS. ‘And so it is your recipe,’ she said.

‘Yes! Yes, it’s also my recipe,’ came the cry from inside.

‘Are you satisfied now? Anyway, that’s incidental.’

‘Of course it is, Doctor,’ said Mel, following him in.

‘That’s got nothing to do with it.’

Seconds later, observant drivers were astonished when a police box that hadn’t been there on their morning journey suddenly wasn’t there now, either.

Therése Gavalle stood at the very bottom, also clearly the very heart, of the Network looking up. All around her the glass ceilings showed the soles of people’s feet walking around, sitting at terminals, etc. And above them, more floors of more feet, tables, chairs, etc. It was a weird experience, like staring at a section through a building, seeing it as the architect might have intended..

She and Doe were surrounded by white-coated technicians, who seemed to have a team leader in one Christophe Brel, Brel, it seemed, was terrified of both her and Doe. Come to think of it, as she watched him Brel seemed terrified of everyone. Pretty useless as a ‘team leader’ then.

Yet people did seem to be listening to him and –

Something suddenly struck her as odd. She frowned at Doe.

‘Why is everyone speaking in English?’

Doe shrugged. ‘I don’t speak French. Not a word. I’ve tried learning it since I’ve been here, but nothing new goes in I’m afraid. That’s why the letter we sent requested you practise your English.’

Gavalle pointed at the corridor leading back to the elevator.

‘Down there – that room with the... well they look like coffins. What is it for?’

‘Ah, the inquiring mind. Marvellous. That, my dear Captain, is why you, me, Brel, Devin and everyone else are here. Follow me.’

He led the way down a level, into the grey, drab but reassuringly solid corridor, turned right under the archway and into the special control

room Gavalle had looked into earlier.

A transparent door led into the coffin area. Inside, a technician with a clipboard was ticking off a list as he walked around each one. 'And they are?'

Doe gave her that boyish grin, that awfully terribly upper-crust English patronising smile that she detested in his fellow countrymen. The English were always so smug, so full of themselves. Doe more so than most.

'What does the name C-19 mean to you, Captain?'

Gavalle considered. She remembered C-19 was part of the government in Britain – one of the security sections. In fact, she recalled, it dealt directly with the United Nations, funding various projects.

'UNIT,' was the word that came to her lips.

Doe put his hands behind his back, taking the stance of a teacher, and Gavalle thought he looked as if he considered her his star pupil. She also thought he looked a bit of a prat.

'Indeed. UNIT. A paramilitary task force with specialised scientific and medical sections, dealing with what one might term "the unexplained". The Russians had a similar organisation during the cold war and the Americans, of course, don't believe in the paranormal, aliens or anything else bizarre unless it lives in Roswell. I gather the FBI have a few pocket departments to cover up anything unusual. UNIT.'

'What about them?'

'You tell me.'

Gavalle thought. 'Formed in the early Seventies, known to have held off at least three extraterrestrial incursions, possibly more, plus a lot of home-grown menaces that may or may not have had alien origins. The British branch of UNIT is the most active, and was headed up by Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart until his retirement. More?'

Doe nodded. 'Please.'

Gavalle really had to think about this – she'd read a lot about UNIT but never encountered it herself. 'There's a man known only as the Master who Interpol failed to capture.'

UNIT spent over three million sterling hunting him. A lot of their supposedly alien artefacts went missing after C-19 was exposed as corrupt and were later reported destroyed. They exposed SenéNet, the Keller method, the Parakon Corporation and... I think it was called TOMTIT... as hoaxes. They introduced martial law in London after some lizards escaped from the big zoo at Regent's Park and provided security for the peace conference back in the Jubilee year.'

'Come,' Doe said, and opened the door into the inner room. It was a tight squeeze, but eased when the technician hurried away muttering an apology. They were now alone with the eight coffins. 'There's one thing UNIT have never had, be it Lethbridge-Stewart's lot or anyone out of Geneva. They never had any of these.' Doe pressed a small switch on the nearest coffin and the end furthest from the central plinth rose up, revealing a sleeping woman inside. A series of ECG tags and wires was attached to her body and head from the underside of the coffin lid.

'Is she dead?'

'No. Asleep. Resting for now.'

'And do all eight coffins contain sleeping women?'

'Men and women.' Doe stroked the side of the sleeping woman's ankle. 'This is Rosa Marie, from Lyons. She's a telekinetic.'

Gavalle's eyes widened. This was not expected. 'And the others?'

Doe grinned again. 'You don't disappoint me, Therése. I knew you'd be interested. Here in the Network, we have eight specialists – Rosa is our only telekinetic. In my little superpowered menagerie I have talents of varying strengths including a pyrokinetic, an electrokinetic and a wire.'

'A wire?'

'Yves Gaurard can travel mentally through networks – phones, modems, ISDNs, you name it, he can utilise them.'

'That's... that's *fantastique*. Fantastic.'

Doe sat on the edge of Rosa's coffin. 'Yet you don't question me. You don't tell me I'm insane and that such things cannot exist. Why not?'

Gavalle opened her mouth to reply to him, and realised she didn't actually have an answer. Why did she accept his word?

What he was suggesting was a fantasy, was comic-book stuff.

And yet at the same time she knew without a doubt that what he said was not only possible, it simply had to be true. And yet...

'If you have doubts, let me tell you this,' Doe said. 'Four of them are, as far as we can tell, natural developers. But the other four share one interesting connection, other than that they were all associated with military forces. They have gaps in their memories, gaps that cover the periods when their extraordinary abilities manifested themselves. And do you know, the last thing any of them can recall before waking up in various places around the globe was being stalked by what looked like a man, impervious to bullets, who murdered some or all of their friends. Mean anything to you?'

Gavalle ignored the implication – there were other things to take on board. 'How have you found so many... so many mutants in one city?'

Doe smiled. 'Oh, only Rosa and Yves are French – both come under the memory-loss bracket. Two of my naturals are English, one is American and one's a South African. Our electrokinetic is from Asia, whilst the firestarter is from somewhere in Pakistan. The Magnate has spent a long time tracking them down.'

And for the first time, Thérèse Gavalle was alarmed. The word "Magnate" rang bells in Gavalle's mind – something she had learned about during her training, or maybe picked up on a mission before the events on Réunion – either way, it meant danger. The Magnate was not something to be trifled with.

And so being brought here, discovering the Network, the oily John Doe and even a room full of psychic freaks was nothing compared to realising who she was now working for.

'Do... do they know?'

Doe glanced around. 'Christophe and his chums don't, but certainly Ms de Meanour does. And no, my little elite supermen think they're still employed by the United Nations.

And I'm keeping it that way.'

'But surely these... these people must know?'

‘Strictly speaking, no. A couple, I think, suspect something. The American one just takes the salary and one of the Brits is more empathic than actually telepathic, so he can’t be sure. But that’s the reason they’re comatose most of the time. Either they are sleeping to stop them gathering more than we want, or they’re working off-base. Which two of them are doing now.’

‘What are they doing?’

‘The American, Michael Dudley, vanished on duty about six hours ago local time. The telepath here is scanning for him, on all planes. My other one is in England, in York. Both he and Dudley were tracking down someone who may be a threat to continued secrecy about the existence of the Magnate.’

‘Not healthy, I understand.’ Gavalle laughed nervously. Doe grinned and stood up again, lowering Rosa’s coffin lid. ‘Indeed not. However, the loss, potential anyway, of one of my Networkers is of more concern to me. If Dudley is dead, or lost somewhere in another dimension – which is pretty much of a muchness – my task is to secure a replacement.

Which is where you come in.’

‘Me? What am I to do?’

‘Collect a replacement for me. A simple task for a lady *tres formidable, n’est pas?*’

‘And if I say no?’

‘You signed a contract.’

Gavalle wanted to scream out loud, but restrained her anger. ‘I did not know it was for the Magnate. I assumed it was a private set-up. Or at least a government spin-off.

Something French, something that would show the rest of Europe that we are so much better.’

‘Your patriotism will be your downfall, Captain, be careful.’

‘If I’d known it was the Magnate... ‘

‘Ms de Meanour would have had to kill you on the spot had you then refused. It was safer for you to make you join unknowingly. You are

free to leave – but rest assured, your body will be just one more skeleton amongst so many in the catacombs above.’ Doe walked away, out of the coffin room, through the control area and out under the arch, back towards the elevator. Pushing past a couple of technicians, Gavalle followed him angrily.

‘Basically, I’m already dead. If I work for the Magnate my survival is not assured. If I quit my death is, you mean.’

‘That’s about it, Captain.’ The elevator doors closed on them, and they rose up. Gavalle didn’t speak until they were back in Doe’s bland grey office, where Ms de Meanour was waiting. With her was another muscular woman, cropped blonde hair, same tattoo.

Gavalle instantly took in their relationship, and felt her skin crawl and bile in her throat. She wanted to ask if it was also Magnate policy to employ such hideous deviants, but thought better of it.

As if reading her mind like one of his precious Networkers, Doe looked Gavalle in the face and she recoiled at the sudden harshness in his look. 'My associates are assassins, Captain. Better than you, better than me, and better than any I've ever met. They work discreetly, professionally and, more importantly, successfully. You will be working closely with them.' Both Amazonian woman grinned lasciviously. Gavalle wasn't sure if they were joking. Doe was still speaking, even more harshly than before. 'Deal with it, Captain, or they will deal with you. You are part of the Magnate now until the day you die. I'd prefer it if that were fifty years hence and not fifty minutes. Understood?'

Gavalle was in over her head. Ever since recovering from her 'incident' she'd been proud of the fact that she was in full control of her life – what she did, who she saw, who she liked, who she worked with and who she killed.

Not any longer – and there was nothing she could do about it.

Yet.

For now, she would play along. If nothing else, she had no doubt she could be useful to the Magnate in the short term, if only to replace this Oxbridge fop and run the place more efficiently.

But obviously she didn't say any of this. Instead she sat on the table edge; allowing herself to be near the new assassin, the blonde one. Vile as doing this was, it might suggest she was willing to be... flexible to her new employers.

'And you, Mr Doe? What do you get out of all this?'

Doe pulled open a drawer in a filing cabinet and brought out a couple of photographs marked with the British government seal of the Secret Service. He handed them to her.

'Revenge, Captain. Pure and simple.'

Gavalle looked at the picture, and shrugged. 'OK, so that's Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT. Who is the other man?' He was taller than the Brigadier, and maybe a dozen years older, dressed in a black jacket,

frilly white shirt and rather eccentric cape, with a shock of apparently prematurely white hair.

‘That man, Captain, is the Doctor.’

‘Really? UNIT’s scientific adviser. I wondered what he looked like.’

‘As I told you, like you something happened to me but, unlike you or my little troupe downstairs, I have never regained my memory. Except for one thing. I was somehow connected with UNIT, working for those two. And I know they are responsible for my condition. Either they’ll get my memory back for me, or I’ll kill them.’

Therése Gavalle listened carefully as John Doe, or whatever his name really was, spoke. A former UNIT

operative, lost on a mission, now amnesiac and holding a grudge against his superior officers. And now, with the finances and resources of the world’s most underground and most feared subversive organisation to back him up. Doe was certainly skilful, driven and dedicated. However, he was also probably completely and utterly insane, and she had just been coerced into working for him.

Taking out that pension policy, she now decided, had been a waste of time. She was very unlikely to be around long enough to claim it.

One of the men John Doe wanted to be revenged on was currently in a frightful strop, and not just because of an article he’d read in the newspaper. Despite being older than John Doe remembered (or rather, failed to), he looked younger. He had short blonde curls, a slightly expanded waistline and the outrageous frilly shirt had given way to a more outrageous multicoloured patchwork coat for which Joseph, eleventh son of Jacob, would have sold his sheep. But that was the trouble with regeneration. Although the wit, sharp inquisitive mind and heroic drive stay the same each new body actually takes a very distinctive – and frequently antithetical – approach to haute couture. This current model was a good case in point –

his immediately preceding body had had a nice, rather understated beige frock coat and cricket jumper, slightly offset by daring red-striped trousers. Sadly, the current vibrant coat was not contrasted with sedate trousers, but with similar stripy ones of, worse still, banana yellow with black, topped (or rather bottomed) off with clashing orange and green spats.

What upset Mel, who wasn’t averse to a few daringly colourful outfits

herself, was the fact that the Doctor lacked any sense of self-awareness. He simply would not acknowledge that his outfit frequently drew attention (usually unwanted – for instance, it is very difficult to hide in a rocky landscape from ravenous Bovinites when your clothing resembles a hippie bus crashing into a paint factory), and he actually, genuinely, believed he looked good.

Mel was having one of those ‘why couldn’t he wear black’

moments right now.

The TARDIS had arrived on the Norfolk Broads. Quite literally in fact, and had sunk far enough for brown sludgy water to swamp its floor when the doors were forced open.

Mel, sensibly, had crawled on to the console. The Doctor was not really built for such nimble manoeuvres and his spats were drowned in seconds. Rather than try and move the TARDIS, he had stomped off and returned a few moments later in bright green waders that came up to his knees.

He had wordlessly scooped Mel off the console, rather like a suitcase, and carried her out, slamming the TARDIS door behind him and trudging through the waterlogged grassy dunes until they came to a concrete footbridge. He had placed Mel gently back on terra firma and continued walking away from the TARDIS.

Mel guessed he knew where he was going but as she herself didn’t have a clue she just trotted to keep up with him, taking eight small steps to compensate for each of his purposeful – some might say aggressive – strides. Resembling a caricatured Laurel and Hardy (bad.1960s MGM cartoon version, obviously), they made their way across the bridge, to a short road that led into the rear of a church. Civilisation.

Well, a cemetery with more gravestones that Mel had ever seen in her life.

However, Mel didn’t get a chance to take much in. Oh, except for the parish notice board which informed her that the village was called Great Rokeby. As it seemed to consist of two streets with four cottages in each, and a tiny corner shop that couldn’t have done any real business in decades, Mel shuddered to think what little Rokeby looked like. Then again, ever since leaving her home town of Pease Pottage, Mel had seen and done so many odd things that it was not unreasonable for her to suppose that little Rokeby might be a

sprawling metropolis covering half of Norfolk and Suffolk.

Life with the Doctor caused you to think along those lines.

It was more fun that way. And far safer.

The Doctor stopped outside Mog Cottage, which – judging from the tiny sign outside – was the base of the Norfolk Cattery, temporary home for displaced cats whose owners wanted to get a suntan somewhere on the Mediterranean or go Christmas shopping in New York.

Mel shuddered to think what the Doctor was going to do next in his current mood, but she had a sudden vision of standing in Times Square and thought that New York was probably much safer than Great Rokeby was going to be in a moment or two.

‘Evelyn!’ the Doctor bellowed. ‘Evelyn Smythe, open this door at once, you fraudulent old –’

‘I’ll thank you not to stand in the street shouting, young man,’ said an elderly man emerging from the dusty corner shop. ‘This is a nice neighbourhood.’

‘Neighbourhood? It’s barely a hamlet. You need council estates, streetlamps, a police station and an Esso station to be a neighbourhood,’ snorted the Doctor. He glanced around. ‘A charming hamlet, I grant you, probably occupied by charming and sophisticated types –’

‘We like to think so,’ agreed the resident.

‘Except for the woman who is hiding in the living room of Mog Cottage, who thinks...’ The Doctor was shouting loudly enough now, Mel decided, for the stone church to collapse thinking an earthquake had occurred. ‘... who thinks that ducking down and twitching the nets will make me somehow think she’s not in.’

No response from Mog Cottage.

‘Is he all right?’ the elderly man asked Mel. ‘He seems a tad excitable.’

‘Oh, this is nothing,’ Mel said confidentially. ‘You should see him if he’s fishing and nothing bites.’

The man shook his head and scurried into one of the opposite

cottages, desperate to escape what he assumed would be an all-out war between the shouty man and that woman who had moved into Mog Cottage a few months back.

The Doctor pushed open the cottage gate (which could do with a lick of paint, Mel noticed) and grabbed the wrought-iron door knocker, intending to rat-a-tat-tat on the white-painted wooden door.

He never got around to it. The door whipped open, an arm snaked out and the Doctor was ferociously yanked inside, a look of total astonishment on his face.

As Mel went to follow him, the door slammed shut in her face.

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ she said, and gently used the knocker to let whoever was inside know that she wasn’t.

The door opened almost immediately to reveal the Doctor.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said. ‘We thought you’d got lo-’

He didn’t finish as, once again, he was jerked away. This time he was replaced by a smiling middle-aged lady resplendent in a tweed skirt and dull orange cardigan. A pair of owl-like spectacles sat on her nose, and her pudding-bowl haircut was threaded with silver. But what Mel noticed immediately was that she was smiling. Indeed, Mel immediately got the impression that she rarely stopped smiling.

‘Oh come in, my dear girl. Ignore him, his manners haven’t improved with age.’

Mel held her hand out. ‘Melanie Bush. My friends call me Mel.’

‘Hello Mel, I’m Evelyn. Pleasure to meet you. Tea or coffee? No, wait a moment, let me look at you.’ And she gave Mel a detailed but curiously noninvasive once-over. ‘You remind me of Kylie Dawes, second year social studies and philosophy. Lovely girl, never did any work. Probably be a lawyer one day. And like her, you probably don’t touch tea or coffee or anything with caffeine in it. And I bet,’ Evelyn licked her lips as she considered her next pronouncement, ‘I bet you don’t drink orange juice often either. She never did.’

So it’ll either be cauliflower soup or carrot juice.’

‘Carrot juice,’ muttered the Doctor from his slumped position on the chintzy sofa. ‘It’s always carrot juice. “What would you like to drink

today Mel?" "Oh Doctor, I'd like carrot juice because it's full of vitamins and natural goodness and none of those nasty things like calories, or sugar." Or taste! Get her carrot juice, Evelyn.'

Evelyn just smiled at Mel. 'Did you hear anything my dear? I thought I heard a strange buzzing like... like an angry bee. But I think I'll ignore it.'

'Carrot juice would be lovely,' said Mel. 'Thank you.'

As Evelyn wandered into the kitchen Mel glanced around, deliberately not looking at the Doctor.

To say the cottage was a mess was an understatement. It was clean – Mel couldn't see evidence of dust, dirty cups or a bin full of paper. But it was as if someone had taken the cottage and shaken it like a snowstorm paperweight and everything had settled in the least likely or convenient place.

Evelyn called out from the kitchen as she filled the kettle with water. 'Biscuit, Mel? Wholemeal, I make them myself.'

It would be rude to refuse, Mel decided. 'Yes please.'

'In the biscuit tin. Red one. You can't miss it.'

Mel looked around. She had already decided that she undoubtedly would miss it. Then again, something red would show up easily enough.

Wouldn't it?

No. Clearly not.

She looked at the Doctor, but he made a big thing of turning the other cheek each time she tried to catch his eye, and finding something interesting to look at on the ceiling.

Mel stared around the room. A vast bookcase filled one wall, but although all the books looked brand-new, none of them were in any order... Unless... She grabbed a pile of papers from under a vacuum 'Cleaner and flicked through them. Hotel receipts for the Parkdown Hotel in Lyndhurst, plus various postcards – of the same town, and a map of Southampton. And the vacuum was in front of the fireplace.

She looked back to the doorway of the cottage, and noticed an old

radio on the windowsill and, beside that, some unused plastic Rowlplugs and an AA guide to Britain's roads.

‘Evelyn?’

‘Yes my dear?’

‘Which is more important? The biscuit tin or the biscuits themselves?’

‘Oh very good, Mel,’ Evelyn called back. ‘And it’s the biscuits.’ Evelyn popped her head back into the room. ‘He never got it, you know,’ she said, indicating the Doctor with an elbow. ‘Couldn’t find the phone when we first met.’

‘I did!’ said the Doctor. ‘Eventually. I remember it was on a table, under piles of students’ essays.’

‘Term papers,’ said Mel suddenly.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said the Doctor.

‘Oh Doctor, it’s obvious. Telephone, on a table under term papers.’

‘Oh she’s bright, this one, Doctor,’ said Evelyn, finally bringing a huge pot of tea into the room. ‘Spot on.’

‘I don’t see the significance of –’

Mel suddenly clapped her hands, walked to the bookcase and smiled. ‘I knew it,’ she said. ‘Broom.’ She lifted the broom and, sure enough, underneath it there was a bright red biscuit tin.

‘Radio, Rowlplugs, road maps. Books, broom, biscuits!’

Evelyn laughed. ‘By Jove, I think she’s got it!’

The Doctor decided they were both mad. He looked from one to the other, shaking his head. ‘Batty. Both of you.’

Mel pointed at the vacuum cleaner near the fireplace.

‘Hoover, hearth, hotel bills! It’s easy – everything alphabetical

– an area of the room allocated to each letter.’

Evelyn’s smile faded slightly. ‘Hotel bills? No, H isn’t for Hotel bills. That’d be under I.’

‘I?’

‘I for Ignore.’ She looked towards vacuum cleaner. ‘Oh,’

she said. ‘Oh right. It’s Hampshire actually. I had to take one of my cats down there the other week and made a weekend break of it.’

‘Mad. You’re both potty,’ said the Doctor, snatching a biscuit from the tin and shoving the whole thing in his mouth.

He immediately regretted doing so, as it was a very solid biscuit and didn’t break, no matter how hard he tried to shut his mouth. ‘Vewwwy ice’ he said, trying not to choke.

Trey Korte stared at himself in the mirror, and wasn’t too keen on what he saw looking back.

It wasn’t vanity, not in a physical sense. He was twenty-three but still looked as though he was in his late teens –

which was sometimes a boon and sometimes a downright curse in his line of work. Half the time, he could get away with things because people thought he was cute; at other times no one took him seriously. He had the sort of good, clean-cut all-American-jock looks that would probably still require him to show his ID at the bars in his native Illinois. Luckily, British laws were less draconian, and at the moment that was convenient as he had a pint waiting for him in the saloon bar of the Duck and Reed just off London’s Gray’s Inn Road. It had been bought by the man he had been sent to scan, one Richard Hope-Urwin, a very rich young entrepreneur who had suddenly materialised in the City a few months back amidst a furore about his very exciting and ground-breaking plans for a new on-line medical base. The company, CalMed 1, would be sent medical diagnoses by worried patients, and would then use its resources to identify the possible problem and suggest whether a visit to a GP, a hospital or simply a trip to the pharmacist would do.

The BMA were concerned about the web-page operators’

credentials, and various government types were worried that, as no fees were involved, it might conflict with the NHS

charter.

Trey had been brought in, as part of his hush-hush work with C-19 in Whitehall, to use his paranormal abilities to read Hope-Urwin’s mind,

in the guise of interviewing him for *New Scientist*. Trey wasn't happy about using his abilities in this way – he never was – but the money would go towards his...

his quest. There was that, and also the fact that his working visa had expired – he wasn't officially a resident of the UK –

and without keeping C-19 sweet he'd be shipped back to the States and never find the answers he was looking for.

The moment he met Hope-Urwin Trey could tell he wasn't remotely human, although what he actually was – well, that was anybody's guess. But he wasn't at liberty to let Hope-Urwin know he'd sussed his little secret and went through the charade of conducting the interview. After fifty minutes' chat, Hope-Urwin had offered to get another round in and Trey had excused himself.

Now, standing in the rather dank and smelly pub toilet, Trey was gazing at his own reflection. He was wondering just how much further he was willing to prostitute his telepathic abilities for a government that had, so far, failed to live up to any of their promises, other than not deporting him.

'How do you live with yourself?' he quoted at his reflection.

Taking a long, hard breath, he splashed some water on his face and hands, dried them on some hard green paper towels and returned to the smoking hub of the pub.

Hope-Urwin was seated as before but he'd been joined by what in a bad gangster movie might be described as heavies.

In fact, the two men were so clichéd that they confirmed that Trey's earlier suspicions were justified. Their 'hard man'

looks clearly came from the movies – dark glasses, black suits, black ties, gelled thinning hair, and one of them had 'love'

inscribed on one set of knuckles, 'hate' on the other.

Oddly, few of the other people in the pub gave them more than a glance, apart from the landlord who was moving his glasses off the shelves behind the bar. Just in case.

Not really a problem – Trey's skills were purely mental and although he was well-built and fit he was no scrapper, and found the idea of

fighting repulsive. His good physique was for reasons of health rather than looks. Not that these guys needed to know that.

As he sat down he looked at the drink Hope-Urwin had bought him and wondered if it was poisoned.

‘No, it’s not,’ Hope-Urwin said, smiling at him. ‘One hundred per cent German lager, although probably laced with the impurities of the English pumps. But it won’t kill you.’

‘Unlike you,’ Trey said, not bothering to pretend any longer. ‘When did you know?’

Hope-Urwin shrugged. ‘The moment you scanned me.’

You might as well have held up a banner saying “Hey I’m telepathic, working for the British government and am going to expose you as an alien”. Although, considering the looks you might have got in here, I can see why you went for the subterfuge route.’

Trey grimaced. ‘And your pals here?’

‘Well now, I have three choices. To see what your government does with your information –’

‘They’re not “my” government. I merely work for them.’

‘Whatever. Secondly, my friends here could arrange for you to see the underside of a bus or tube train before you make your report. Or –’

‘Or?’

‘Or we could cut our losses, and head elsewhere to find a planet we can more easily steal blood and internal organs from.’

‘What are you then?’ Trey risked a sip of his lager.

‘We’re part of the Hirudon Conglomerate, a small and relatively new part of the tri-planet alliance of Calfedoria. Our job is to go out and get parts for our cloning project. Then, in a few hundred years, we’ll sell the technology to planets such as yours. Of course, arriving with fully cloned disease-free humans whose originals are long since dead, we’d be welcomed with open arms.’

‘Of course, you’re pseudomorphs,’ Trey said, nodding his head as if it all made sense. ‘So, what do you really look like?’

He was genuinely intrigued. He'd not encountered shape-shifters before – his scans had merely revealed that Richard Hope-Urwin's form was not his natural one.

'Fluidic. We don't have shapes as you know them. I think our nearest simile here on earth would be an amoeba, except we're multicellular.'

'You know, my department, C-19, would be fascinated to meet you. They're not exactly new to alien life forms, if you'll excuse the expression.'

'Alien or life form?'

'Whatever.'

Hope-Urwin shook his head. Or whatever it really was.

'No. No thank you. I've already sent a message out to my base team, who are going to arrange for our stock to plummet this afternoon. By midday tomorrow CalMed 1 will be bankrupt, allowing you, or someone, to expose us as frauds in a few months. Then some creditors can go on a pointless quest to find us, only to draw a blank.'

Trey stiffened suddenly and Hope-Urwin frowned.

'I do apologise, Mr Korte, I appear to have struck a nerve.

I believe you, too, are on a quest. And if I read you correctly, it's one you also believe is fruitless. Yet... yet you continue.

Why?'

Trey ignored him. 'So, do I get the bus treatment, the subway treatment or can I go home safely in the knowledge that none of us will ever meet again? No matter how briefly?'

Hope-Urwin offered a hand and Trey shook it gingerly.

'Goodbye Mr Korte. I hope the British government pay you enough to do their dirty work for them. And good luck in your personal mission. However pointless it may be, I see no advantage in my getting in your way.'

And Hope-Urwin and his two thugs left the pub, leaving Trey sitting with his lager.

He wasn't sure which had shaken him up more – Hope-Urwin's casual

‘Oh yes I’m an alien’ routine or the fact that he could so easily read Trey’s mind without Trey being able to feel it.

Or was it the fact that the Hirudon had pinpointed, and rather brutally exposed, the worthlessness of the ambition that drove Trey forward day by day.

Chapter Seven

Paranoimia

Mel woke to the sound of bird song and a nice winter freshness in the air, which reminded her of home.

She and the Doctor had travelled together for, well, at least a year she guessed. It was hard to gauge exact time in the TARDIS, but that’s what it felt like. Whatever. Anyway, although Mel had found the time, and some very interesting ways, to get postcards or messages back to her doting parents, she really didn’t feel like facing them. After all, she had departed without much of a goodbye, and as they had no way of communicating with her in return, she wasn’t too sure of the reception she, and particularly the Doctor, would receive.

Christine and Alan Bush were well-respected members of the Pease Pottage social whirl, and the disappearance of their eccentric daughter had probably caused a certain amount of paranoia.

But then, what if something was wrong? What if something had happened to one or other of them? How could she live with herself if something bad had occurred and here she was, in the same country and, it seemed, roughly the right era, and she didn’t know about it?

Of course, suppose it was 1987? In that case, the younger Mel was still at university, and neither of her parents would believe what had happened to her. Or what if it was ten years after she had left, and if none of her messages had got home?

They might have assumed she was dead or started a huge national campaign to find her. If she popped up now, looking only a few months rather than ten years older, what might that do to them?

Or worse still, what if she was already home, older and more experienced? Or maybe injured – what if during some future battle against the Daleks or the Chelonians or the Marmossan Horde she had lost a limb or was blinded, and was sitting at home now, a burden to her parents? If the younger, healthy Mel suddenly arrived and said,

‘Hi, thought I’d drop by,’ what effect would that have on them? Or indeed on the elder Melanie?

No, painful as it was, it was probably best to ignore them this time around.

She pushed herself up on to the pillow and reached for a glass of water from the night before.

It was gone, replaced by a glass of yellow juice, a fresh halved grapefruit and a copy of a newspaper – today’s she guessed. It was 30 December 1993 – she’d been away over four years, parents’ time.

Attached to the front of the paper was a yellow Post-it note in the Doctor’s handwriting: ‘Go on, call them’, and an arrow pointing off the page. She looked again at the small occasional table Evelyn had put beside her bed, and on it was a telephone.

‘Thanks, Doc,’ she said. ‘Heap on the guilt, why don’t you.’

She hauled herself out of bed, drank the carrot juice in one gulp, and took a spoonful of the grapefruit, its bitterness awakening her senses properly.

She found a rather delightful kimono in a wardrobe and headed for the bathroom, where she took a brief bath and generally tidied herself up. Then she went back to the bedroom and dressed. (She didn’t want to ask how her pink top with that huge black triangle on the chest, and her white slacks had got there – surely the Doctor hadn’t got up early enough to trudge over to the TARDIS for her. Oh well, maybe the TARDIS had sent them via pigeon express – it wouldn’t surprise her.) She looked at herself in the mirror – her flamed hair was a good deal shorter than when she’d first boarded the TARDIS. Maybe she should let it grow again, then pile it up on top. She puffed up the hair that was there – no, not long enough yet. Mind you, she quite liked it shorter, it made her look a bit older.

In the pocket of her top (she actually hated this outfit, it was so early Eighties, but she didn’t want to hurt the Doctor’s feelings – or the TARDIS’s) she found a small pink hair clip shaped like a bow, which she thought was rather jaunty and country-stylish. Next to the bed were short black ankle boots.

They seemed to have been immaculately polished, which determined that the TARDIS had at least been responsible for the choice of clothes if not their carriage. The ship’s laundry circuits always made an effort

and she appreciated it.

Washed, dressed and, after applying a bit of lippy from her ever-present purse, she was ready to face the great wide world.

The phone and the Doctor's note remained ignored, but not forgotten, beside the bed.

She re-emerged on to the wooden landing of Evelyn's cottage and trotted down the stairs towards the living room –

which was when she had her first warning of trouble ahead.

When she'd gone to bed last night the Doctor and Evelyn seemed to have begun talking about some historical event or other and were chatting quite pleasantly. This morning, the Doctor's mood was once more as belligerent as it had been when they'd arrived. And once again, Evelyn didn't seem remotely fazed by the abuse she was getting.

It briefly crossed Mel's mind that maybe Evelyn was the Doctor's sister. Oh God – surely not his wife. But that might explain a lot!

Then she remembered Evelyn's comment about one of her students being similar to Mel, in taste at least.

Of course, the Doctor had once lived on Earth during his days working for UNIT, and so perhaps this Evelyn had retired here.

'It's thoroughly irresponsible, Evelyn, and you know it!'

'You only think it's "irresponsible" because I did it, not you. It's not my fault I'm stuck up here, I'd much rather be back at Nottingham. But no, thanks to you and your mishandling of that delightful TARDIS – heaven knows why the poor soul puts up with you – I'm stuck. Here. For five years.'

Mel entered the living room, and stood quietly watching.

Evelyn was busy making pancakes – huge piles of them, while the Doctor sat at the dinner table with his back to her, scoffing said pancakes.

Believing himself to be unseen, the Doctor was layering them with sugar, syrup, more sugar, a dash of lemon and a quick squirt of chocolate sauce. Mel wasn't sure which of these was worse – then

opted for the 'it's all lethal' option and opened her mouth to speak.

'Don't bother dear,' said Evelyn's voice, and Mel could see herself and Evelyn's face reflected in the kitchen mirror.

'Whatever he's putting on the pancakes, well, you won't stop him.'

The Doctor noticed Mel, frowned at her, looked back at the vile toppings on the pancakes and pushed the plate away, defeated by his own greed. 'Perhaps not today,' he said almost to himself.

Mel glanced back at the kitchen and, although Evelyn couldn't possibly see the Doctor, she must've guessed what he had done as she was giving Mel a big thumbs up and a grin.

Mel settled down beside the Doctor, and tried to cheer him up. 'C'mon Doctor, just try a plain one.'

'They can't be good for me, Mel. At least that's what you usually say.'

She nodded. 'Yes, but as with all things, doing it in moderation is better for you. Don't just ignore the pancakes –

it'd be rude to Evelyn if nothing else. Rather than cutting them out, just cut down.'

'Just like when I gave up ciggies,' Evelyn said, now standing behind them: 'I tried stopping dead, but that didn't work. But I realised if I smoked one in three, it soon became one in five. Then one in ten, and within a couple of months I no longer wanted one. It was easier that way, believe me.' She lent over and flipped a couple of plain pancakes on to her own plate with a fork. 'Now, apart from yelling at me, Doctor, what brings you back to England in 1993? Or to what's left of it. An apology perhaps?'

Mel looked from the Doctor to Evelyn, not understanding.

'You don't like 1993?' asked the Doctor.

'Oh, it's been a fine year. Again. I won a couple of hundred betting that Roddy Doyle would win the Booker, that the French would have the rugger sewn up and, best of all, I won a fortune predicting that de Klerk and Mandela would share the Nobel Peace Prize. Believe me, no one could've foreseen that.'

'But you did?' asked Mel, feeling very confused, 'And have they

released Nelson Mandela now?’

‘1990,’ Evelyn said. ‘Next year he becomes South Africa’s president. When are you from?’

‘I left Earth in 1989,’ Mel said. ‘You?’

‘March 2000.’ She suddenly snapped at the Doctor. ‘Do you have any idea what it’s like here, Doctor, years out of time? Do you?’

‘Well, I... ‘

‘No! No you don’t!’ Evelyn was suddenly very angry. ‘Oh yes, I can win a few bets, I can “guess” what’s going to happen in *EastEnders*, I can guess Delia’s favourite chocolate and cranberry cake ingredients, so you can stroll on in here and yell at me for misusing time. But you know what I really want to do? I want to write to John Smith and tell him to watch his health next year, I want to send a message to Lady Di and tell her to never, ever go to Paris again. Or find a way to stop Habyarimana’s assassination and save millions and millions of lives being wasted. But I can’t.’

She sat very heavily in an armchair. ‘And I can’t work. I can’t go back to Nottingham or start up somewhere else because currently the Evelyn Smythe of 1993 is a younger woman, teaching history to people who I know are going to get into drugs, have abortions, be involved in car crashes, and I can’t do a bloody thing about it. And Evelyn is there, as Evelyn Richmond, going through a bitter divorce, pretending it’s all oh-so-jolly while inside she’s cracking up, thinking nothing will ever be worse, that she’ll never recover from it.

And I want to tell her that it will get better. One day. And just for once, I’d like to tell Lawrence that, despite everything, I still love him! But no, you needed someone, didn’t you Doctor. You needed your little twentieth-century network of spies and gatherers, and you needed someone here and I was it. Out of time, unable to talk to my friends, my family. My mother is going to die in three years, Doctor, and I would give anything, anything at all to see her, speak to her one more time. To say the things I wanted to say back then.’ She took her glasses off and rubbed at her eyes. ‘But don’t worry, Doctor, your precious web of time won’t be broken by me.

I’m stronger than all that.’

The Doctor didn’t look Evelyn in the face, but he shuffled a now cold pancake around his plate with his fork. ‘I know.

And that's why it had to be you, Evelyn. I couldn't entrust anyone else with that job.'

Evelyn took a deep breath, replaced her glasses and suddenly beamed up at Mel as if the previous few minutes hadn't happened. 'Forgive my manners, my dear girl. I'll get you some juice and how about some wholemeal? Freshly baked by Miss Routlidge in the next village.' Without waiting for a reply, she was up and back in the kitchen.

Mel stared at the Doctor and held his sleeve gently. 'Why?

Why did you leave her here, so close to her own time but so far?'

The Doctor pursed his lips. 'Unfinished business, Mel. I needed someone to gather information, someone to whom it would be second nature and who would have the strength of character to resist temptations.' He shook his head slowly.

'When it's all over, I'll take her home.'

A glass of juice was suddenly put before Mel. 'The day your TARDIS gets anyone where they're meant to be will be a day worthy of a party.'

'The Doctor got you to 1993, though,' said Mel.

'He got me to 1988 actually. Yes, it's been that long. Oh, the first couple of months were actually quite fun, seeing the past as it were. But five years is five very long years to a mere mortal like me. Of course, we were supposed to be going to 2000. Or so I thought. Where were you headed when you ended up here?'

'1969,' Mel admitted. 'The summer of love! Australian-style.'

Evelyn suddenly laughed. 'Oh well, nothing changes. I've said my piece Doctor, there's no point in going on is there?'

The Doctor took Evelyn's hand and squeezed it gently.

Mel thought it was rare to see him so... genuinely tactile.

There was a history between these two, a friendship that seemed very deep, and one that might have been cut off a bit suddenly. Was this what the future held for her, she wondered.

Just cast adrift by the Doctor one day because her usefulness had come to an end. Or because she'd irritated him so much with exercise

bicycles, carrot juice and her constant hiding of his chocolate bars?

She knew she wasn't the first person the Doctor had had aboard his TARDIS, but somehow she'd instinctively assumed she'd be the last. That they might be travelling for years and years, and that he'd be content one day to retire here on Earth.

Which was silly. Evelyn might have thought that once.

Perhaps she'd harboured romantic feelings for him – they were well matched age-wise, at least to look at. She was what, mid-fifties? And although he was pushing a thousand now, physically he looked late forties. Not unheard of.

What was she doing here? Why wasn't she at home with her mother and father, their nice house, their friends? And Trey.

Trey?

Gosh, she hadn't thought of him since that business with SenéNet, when she'd first encountered the Doctor. He'd been the last friend she'd seen before boarding the TARDIS, and yet he'd not crossed her mind since. What was he up to?

Mother had once harboured hopes that Trey (who Mum herself was not averse to admiring because he did have a body to die for) and Mel might make an item. Trey's preference for people with a Y chromosome rather put paid to that, however.

Perhaps it was time to risk making a journey home, even briefly, after all. It was only 1993 – only four years.

Four years. Then again...

Maybe she'd phone first...

It was 10.35 a.m. and Bob Lines' last day as a policeman. A slight but recurring pressure on his chest, and a large amount of pressure from his wife, had ensured an early but noble retirement from a police force that was sad to see him go.

Lines was a rare copper, one who was universally liked both by his colleagues and the world at large. Brighton's varied community had come to rely on him – indeed, people in some quarters went so far as to actually trust him, which was certainly unusual.

But after a brief run as chief inspector, and seeing how the latest wave of superintendents were fresh-out-of-college types with theoretical degrees rather than on-the-beat experience, Lines had decided it was time to hang up his truncheon and retire to the more charming climes of Chichester. The wife liked her theatre and opera, and Lines had learnt long ago that passive submission to her fancies was actually a rather nice way of keeping their relationship solid. And, despite a number of people suggesting he was a little under her thumb, both Bob and Mrs Lines knew that if he really objected or gave vent to a strong opinion on something he'd get his way. He rarely exercised that power though, and as a result their marriage had survived longer than those of most coppers.

He was in CID, home to him for most of his career since he had transferred to East Sussex from South Kent. His successor in CID, DI Rowe was in her small office – his old office – chewing out a couple of DCs who'd let some drug dealer get the better of them, resulting in a costly and pointless observation two nights ago. A lot of her budget had gone on that, and it was a black mark on her clear-up rate. Poor Steph.

Tonight there was going to be a party in a pub off Edward Street – God, no strippers, please – and then it would be a short drive home and freedom.

Bob Lines loved his job, but he loved the prospect of leaving it behind him even more.

A phone buzzed in the CID main office and he moved a sheaf of paperwork to answer it.

His eye caught Steph Rowe's as she checked to see who was answering the call. She nodded ever so slightly when she saw it was Lines.

'CID,' he said.

'Oh, Mr Lines, hello.' It was young Teddy Russell on the front desk. 'I was looking for you actually, sir. CAD got a call for you a few minutes back, but they hung up.'

'Any idea who it was?'

'According to Sergeant Probert it was male, possibly American, but that was all. Just checking you still worked here. Got you just in time, yeah?'

Lines shrugged. 'I suppose so. OK, thanks Teddy, I'll go see CAD.' He replaced the phone and grinned. He knew it was a cliché, but policemen these days really did seem to be getting younger. PC Russell looked about sixteen sometimes.

Except when he was putting pints away, when he looked a great deal older.

He gave a wave to Rowe, who was too busy to respond, and headed off to the computer aided despatch room, the central area of the station – its heart really – to find out more.

His route took him past the corridor leading down to the front desk, where he could hear that PC Russell was having an argument with someone, which was not really police policy.

The shouting was accompanied by PCs Keibur and Hyde.

Perhaps they were having problems with someone drunk, or high. Wouldn't be the first time. Still best go and see if he could help and-

'Damn you, I need to see Robert Lines! Don't make me hurt you!'

That voice... Of course, an American! But he hadn't heard from him in a couple of years, not since he... well, whatever.

Lines strode into the front desk area, and in an instant all went quiet.

Trey Korte eased himself free of the three officers grappling with him, and grabbed Lines' right arm.

'You have to help me, Bob,' he drawled.

'Trey? What's going on?'

'It's my mind. They want my mind!'

And Trey Korte collapsed to the floor, to all intents and purposes as dead as a doornail.

Brighton's general hospital wasn't where Bob Lines had intended to spend his last day as a policeman, but it was certainly where he seemed to be spending his last lunchtime.

He was sitting at Trey's bedside, metaphorically kicking his heels and wondering what to do. Why was he even there?

If anyone could help the boy it was the hospital staff, not a grouchy old policeman on the verge of entering that final chapter of his life – domesticity. Learning to play bridge, going to garden centres and making new friends with the decrepit souls who played bowls on the park green every Thursday afternoon.

God, why didn't he just shoot himself now?

'Mr Lines... '

It had been barely a whisper, but Lines immediately bent close to Trey's face to see, or rather hear, if the lad said anything else. 'Mr Lines, they're after me,' Trey said quietly.

It was as if each syllable was a strain, a possibility qualified by Trey's next words. 'Monitoring me... I'm trying to stop them reaching me.'

'Who?'

'Called the Magnate... I think... never... never heard of them. They want me... had to warn you... don't think I can resist ...'

'Why do they want you Trey? Because of your ESP?'

Lines gripped the young man's wrist, trying to keep him conscious.

'Want me... don't know why... must stop them... coma...

only way... I'm sorry...'

And Trey was out of it again, his breathing laboured. Lines buzzed the nurse and sat back, pondering. The Magnate?

Meant nothing to him.

When the nurse arrived he explained that Trey had woken briefly and had muttered something, but that he, Lines, had no idea what. 'Didn't seem to be words,' he lied. 'Just as if he was dreaming. Then he went silent. Is he OK?'

The nurse called for help and a few minutes later Trey was officially diagnosed as being in a coma. The doctor in charge, a young woman called Wigmore, seemed to think it was pretty unlikely he'd wake up. Lines neglected to mention that as the young American was one of the most powerful telepaths on Earth it was impossible to know what a coma meant to him.

Of course, he might actually have been one of the weakest telepaths for all Lines knew – he'd not encountered many others. Hell, he'd have pooh-poohed their existence a few years ago, but some of the bizarre events he had witnessed since then had opened his mind a bit more than the average copper's. But still, Trey seemed pretty powerful to him.

They'd met a few years ago when Lines' old friend, the Doctor, had saved them all from the machinations of SenéNet, the games company with a decidedly sinister workforce, who had caused a wave of death amongst the local under-sevens.

Trey's telepathic prowess had been instrumental in shutting down the alien invaders and for a while after that Trey had lived with Lines' oldest friend, Alan Bush, whose daughter Mel had gone off, as it were, with the Doctor.

During that time Trey had helped the police out. He was brought into interviews with suspects and scanned them. The lawyers and their clients never knew he wasn't an actual CID

officer – they never bothered checking. Trey had been especially useful because he could save a lot of time-wasting by 'reading' whether a suspect was innocent or guilty. If someone was innocent, they'd be released. Of course, if a person was guilty it was still up to the police to prove it, but at least they knew it was worth proceeding.

But Trey had become a bit... awkward... about this after a while. He felt that scanning people without their permission was an invasion of their privacy, of their rights even. The police couldn't use him publicly to gather evidence as the defence would get it thrown out of court – by use of section 76

or 78 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984, apparently – and Trey certainly couldn't give evidence himself. After all, what judge in his right mind (if that wasn't a contradiction in terms) would believe in telepaths? And if a judge did, the defence team could deem the evidence to be just a matter of opinion, not proof.

Trey had begun to feel that what he was doing was morally ambiguous and left Brighton to spend some time with friends in London. The last Lines had heard of him was from someone in a government department called C-19, who'd overseen the security mop-up after the SenéNet business. They tried to rope Trey into working for them, but Lines never knew whether he did or not – it

wouldn't say much for C-19's top secret security if he, a common or garden policeman, had been able to find out.

So Trey had vanished and, deep down, Lines couldn't blame him. He had a gift, a fantastic gift, but at times it must have seemed more of a curse, with everybody wanting to know him because of it – never knowing if your friends were really your friends, or just awed by your ability to do a few mind tricks.

Hell, that way lies madness, Robert Lines, and paranoia.

Leave it...

So, now he was left with a mystery or two. Firstly, who did Trey believe were 'after' his mind. And secondly, why come all the way to Brighton to find a policeman he'd not spoken to in ages? And who or what were the Magnate?

Unless... unless it wasn't Bob Lines he wanted directly, but someone who he knew could only be contacted by Bob Lines!

Without waiting another moment Lines ran from the hospital to his car and drove off, heading away from work and towards home.

He reached it in about fifteen minutes, parked the car erratically across the drive and ran indoors, upstairs and into the master bedroom.

'Where? Where, where... '

He suddenly remembered his tiny box of knickknacks, and dug it out of the bottom of the wardrobe, hidden beneath shoes and a disused trouser press.

Inside the box was a small red ball, about the size of a ping-pong ball. Inset into its top was a small switch, which he pressed. Although the Doctor had assured him that its pitch was too high for the human ear to hear it, Lines' had always got earache whenever he used it. This time it was no exception.

Nevertheless, all he could really focus on was hoping that the Doctor, if not on Earth right now, was at least in the right galaxy. Otherwise it might be a while before the TARDIS

picked up the signal.

It was lunchtime and Mel had decided on a walk around the village, to take in the view and see the church again.

Anything to get out of the cottage and the atmosphere in there. Her freedom was somewhat compromised by Evelyn suddenly announcing that she would join her, leaving the Doctor to kick his heels.

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ Evelyn said as they tugged the front door closed behind them.

‘Not at all,’ lied Mel. ‘This is a lovely village, I’m sure there’s lots to see.’

They said nothing of any importance for the first few minutes, just commenting on the weather, birds or the old tree in Mrs Ogwen’s overgrown garden.

‘You don’t have any cats,’ Mel said suddenly.

Evelyn frowned, as if the thought hadn’t crossed her mind.

‘Cattery. The sign outside your front door says you run a cattery. And you said you went to Hampshire with one of your cats recently.’

Evelyn wandered towards a bench by the entrance to the churchyard and sat down, patting the seat for Mel to join her.

The younger woman did so.

‘I like cats,’ Evelyn said, ‘but not in great quantities. The cattery is really just a sign I put up to keep nosy villagers away. Occasionally a friend or a villager will tell me they’ve a friend or relative who needs a moggie housed for a while, but I tend not to advertise. A couple of cats every few months is enough for me. And as I don’t intend staying here for ever, I’ve not bothered to get one of my own. Most I’ve done is bought a rather delightful old car that occasionally goes long enough to get me to the supermarket. I don’t want to make...

attachments. D’you see?’

Mel didn’t really. ‘I know this isn’t your time as such, but how are you going to get back – or forward rather – to where you are from?’

Evelyn pointed back in the direction of her cottage. ‘Him, hopefully. When I’ve done whatever task he wants of me. If not, I’ll flag down the Master or that dear girl Romana or some other time-travelling

renegade who can find a way to get me home.'

Mel suddenly felt very sorry for the older woman, stranded here, so near and yet so far from home.

'You see, my dear,' Evelyn continued, 'I do get so awfully lonely at times. Oh, I know what he does is terribly important, and I can't complain about all the things I've seen and done.'

But I do feel jolly stranded here and, nice as the people are, this isn't the most homelike of villages. Truth to tell, I'm no fan of Norfolk... all the glitz of Great Yarmouth and bank holiday traffic and it gets terribly wet and cold in winter. And hard as it may be to believe it, I'm no spring chicken and my bones get a bit achy in the winter.'

Mel smiled. 'You don't look old,' she said.

Evelyn laughed and patted her hand. 'Bless you for trying, my dear, but you can't lie to me. I've been around youngsters all my professional life, I can spot a fib from a mile off. But I am old, nearly time to retire and I just want to go home again, to my life, my familiar things.' She sighed. 'Silly really, but what I miss most are my books, my cardigans and my photo albums. And my students. One day... '

'Evelyn, I'll talk to him. Get him to take you home.'

'That's sweet of you, Melanie dear, but don't. I did agree to be here after all; and I'm only telling you this because...

well... you're the first person I can talk to about time travel without being dragged off to the Sunnyhill Home for the Perpetually Bewildered.' Evelyn dug into her handbag and produced a bag of Everton Mints. 'Sweetie?'

'I shouldn't,' Mel said. 'Don't tell him.'

'I won't.'

Mel unwrapped a mint and popped it into her mouth.

'How long did you travel with him?'

Evelyn sighed and looked up at the church tower, as if examining the weathercock in detail, and for a moment Mel wondered if she had forgotten the question. She was about to prompt her when the former lecturer sighed. 'It probably wasn't that long in real terms. Quite a few

months but probably not a year. Of course, the TARDIS protects you from time dilation, so although your mind thinks months have passed your body ages only a few weeks. Clever that. And then he left me here – asked me to do some research for him.

Did he leave me any money though? Any way of actually living? Course not. So I used my noggin and worked out that if I was careful, I could use... well, let's say a bit of foreknowledge, and set myself up nicely. Oh not heaps of money – that would be a bit off. But enough to be comfortable..I mean, the lottery hasn't started up yet, and anyway I can't remember the numbers from each week. So I do odd little things – I put a hundred on Sydney being the base for the 2000 Olympics, knowing that'll come up trumps in a year or so. And a couple of Derby winners. Oh yes, and that delightful Scots lad winning the snooker. Tides me over y'see.

Best of all, I've patented the phrase Digital Versatile Disc, but with an opt-out that I'll sell it for a reasonable price in a few years. But keep it to yourself, he'd be awfully cross if he knew. You saw how he reacted to me knowing Delia's special recipe for that scrummy cake, which she won't publish until 1998.'

'What about your husband? I assume from what you said earlier, your other self and he are still married now.'

'Ah, well, I always used my maiden name professionally but my married name is Richmond. Or was. Of course, that other Dr Evelyn Smythe is at Nottingham now. Me. As I was then. Now. Oh, it must be dreadfully confusing, but when you've travelled as much as I have, it'll all make sense.

Anyway, I thought I can't be Evelyn Smythe or the tax office will be down on both of us like a ton of bricks. So I use the name Eve Richmond. And stay away from Nottingham, so there's no chance of us meeting. Heaven knows what would happen if we did.' Evelyn shifted slightly on the seat and Mel guessed she was going to change the subject.

She did. 'So, has he ever mentioned the Eye of Orion?'

'Oh yes-'

'Ah, thought so,' Evelyn continued. 'Always promised to take me there. Said it was the most peaceful place in the universe. Pure tranquillity.'

‘It is lovely,’ said Mel. ‘The trees, the rose gardens... Oh, and a lovely Gothic folly. You can climb up it and stare across to the mountains and down into valleys full of marvellous animals. They look like baby zebras but have snake’s heads and tiny wings on their ankles.’

‘Oh,’ said Evelyn. ‘Oh, oh I’m so glad you’ve seen it,’ she added brightly. ‘Did he take you to the Kurgon Wonder?’

Mel nodded. ‘You?’

‘Not quite. He saw it. I was stuck inside the TARDIS at the time – some strange effect of the Wonder meant I couldn’t get out.’

‘It’s lovely. And sad at the same time. You can’t help feeling moved by the story of how it came into being.’ Mel finished her sweet as she spoke.

Evelyn casually offered her another. ‘I met one of my heroes, you know. Charles Darwin – lovely man. Took quite a shine to me, I think, but this old bird was too old for him.

There was someone who actually asked me to leave the TARDIS and stay with him. But the Doctor rightly talked me out of it, and I had to let him down. Don’t think old Tonka forgave either of us.’

‘Tonka? Tonka Travers?’

‘You met Captain Travers?’

Mel nodded. ‘Commodore now. He never seemed happy to see the Doctor. Now I know why.’

Evelyn drew breath. ‘Is he... still OK?’

Mel frowned, confused.

‘I saw a lot of people die, Mel. After a while you have to switch off – you need to become disaffected, I suppose, which sounds awful but is the only way to cope.’ Evelyn paused. ‘I told myself I’d never make emotional attachments to people we met, just in case. But I do want to know what happened to him.’ She looked down at her feet. ‘He was a good man. And they’re rare, no matter where you are in the universe.’

‘He was fine when we said goodbye,’ Mel said. ‘Honest.’

‘Good. I’m glad.’ She patted Mel’s hand again. ‘Taken you lots of places already, hasn’t he. Eye of Orion, the Kurgon Wonder, off to see

Tonka. Sounds like you've been having a good time.' Evelyn stood up suddenly. 'C'mon, let's go back.'

He'll have probably tried to light the fire and blown the cottage up by now.'

'What?'

'It's a gas fire that just looks like a real one. Come on.'

And Evelyn strode away.

Mel watched her. She was feeling slightly guilty because she had obviously had a good time with the Doctor, and certainly done more than Evelyn had.

And she felt sure that Evelyn seemed to be walking differently now, more like a woman in her late fifties whose bones felt the chill and less like the spunky university lecturer she had first appeared to be.

The Doctor was pacing up and down when the women returned, papers strewn haphazardly over the room, his patchwork coat thrown carelessly over the big armchair. In his hand were some photographs.

'I bought those from the local newspaper,' Evelyn said without waiting for the Doctor to comment. 'I thought you'd find them more interesting than the cuttings themselves.'

The Doctor looked at her, smiling for what seemed to be the first time in ages. 'You are a wonderful lady, Evelyn Smythe.'

Mel noted that this seemed to cheer Evelyn up a bit, but nothing was going to shake her mental image of a rather lonely elderly woman hiding behind that forced jollity, put on, it seemed, to deflect the one person responsible for making her unhappy in the first place.

'Holiday snaps?' Mel joked, hoping to break her own train of thought.

The Doctor looked suddenly rabbit-caught-in-headlights, and quickly squirrelled the photos back inside a large stiff manila envelope.

'Anyway,' he said, clearly changing the subject, 'how was the morning air?'

'Doctor!' Mel gasped and pointed into the corner of the kitchen. 'What... what's that?'

The Doctor turned to look, his body ready for whatever alien menace was about to come smashing its way the cottage.

Of course there was nothing there, but it gave Mel the chance to nip over, nab the envelope of photos and remove them before either he or Evelyn could suss her ruse.

‘Oh very good, Mel,’ he moaned.

But Mel was transfixed by the photographs. They were black-and-white ten by eights of a group of people outside a schoolyard. Most of them were grinning happily, and from the number of kids in the photos Mel guessed it was some successful fundraising project. But it was the five in the centre of one particular photograph who attracted her attention. She didn’t know the tall light-haired girl, but the youths on either side of her were unmistakable, even five years on. And worse still, the two people behind them made her feel almost physically ill. She didn’t know their names – it had never occurred to her that they even had names. To her they were just the Irish twins, cold-hearted killers, whose bodies had been augmented with alien technology, whose flesh was linked with undegradable plastic, long linked polymer chains that carried evil commands through their nervous systems.

They had confronted Mel in the forests near her home in Sussex and although she had evaded death – indeed at their final meeting, they had offered her the information that helped destroy their nameless paymaster – their existence had traumatised her a lot more than she had realised back then.

More than once, in the TARDIS, the Doctor had found her suffering from nightmares brought on by the memory.

The two youths – well, they would be men now – had been her friends. Joe Hambidge had been the younger brother of an old schoolfriend and had been in a relationship with her friend Trey. The other one was Ashley, with whom she’d gone through hell in a bizarre hospital. They had helped each other to escape, together they had overcome their fears of the terrible automata that had stalked them. Ash had ultimately betrayed her to the evil that had created the automata, but through no fault of his own. Like the twins, both Joe and Ashley had undergone augmentation, their central nervous systems and blood replaced with alien energies and skin and bone grafts, whilst their minds seemed to be free and normal until their masters needed them, whereupon they became mindless drones to the

aliens' wills.

She gazed at the Doctor and Evelyn. 'Why?' was all she could say.

Evelyn clearly sensed that this was one for the Doctor, and slipped away into the kitchen.

The Doctor shoved his coat off the armchair and sat down.

He suggested Mel do the same, but she stood her ground. She was too angry, too confused to do anything else. 'Why?' was all she could say again.

'Oh Mel, I'm so sorry. I wanted to keep this from you as long as possible. You see, I had to keep track of these people.

The twins have been in and out of my lives, my involvement with Earth for many years. Always one step ahead.' He swallowed. 'Do you remember when you first stole aboard my TARDIS in Brighton? Did you wonder where I'd been? Why it took me so long between saying my farewells to you and the Brigadier in the Ashdown forest to actually returning to my ship? I'd been here, to see Evelyn. I asked her to do a job for me – to track them. Find out whatever she could. Not just because they were a potential danger, but because of those two youngsters. You see, Mel, I didn't know them well. I only really knew of the boy Joe because of Trey and his anguish.

But I felt responsible. Too often events happen on a planet, any planet, and I walk away. The wrongs righted, the oppressed arisen, the evil thwarted. But what of the people I leave behind? What of the scars on that society? I want to turn my back, to say "It's your problem now, I've done my bit,"

but I can't. As the years have gone by, as experiences have piled upon experiences, I'm left caring more, worrying more.'

He laughed. 'You know, I've heard what people say about this latest model, this newest Doctor. Oh, not as sweet as the last one. Not as elegant as another one, or as clever as another, but I don't choose these bodies. In the same way that you humans can't select your genes, that you can't design your bodies to guarantee no illnesses, disabilities or deformities, nor can I. And nor do I want to. The people of this universe are fantastic because of their diversity, because the capricious whims of fate give them green eyes, only one arm or... or red hair! I have to get used to that diversity on a regular basis, and this latest body is full of contradictions. I *know* about them.

I'm *aware* of them, but I can't *change* them. Whatever exaggeration of character it is that makes me wear that coat, also makes me hide something else. My previous bodies often wore, to use one of your expressions, their hearts on their sleeves. Which was good at the time. But now, I can't do that.

I have to hide, which can be frustrating because I know inside that it should be different, that I am hiding behind something I can't define enough to change.

'That's why I ask friends like Evelyn to help me out – to do the work I can't always be around to do. That I can't allow myself to do because I could become obsessed, ignoring the plights of millions somewhere, who I may be able to do good for, because I've become single-minded about the injustice done to two human lads by alien technology that I failed to destroy twenty-odd years ago.'

He stopped and took a deep breath: 'I knew the effect the twins had on you, of course. But I also knew that Evelyn might have learnt something by now. I needed to stop by to check up, but didn't want you to find out in case it was a wild goose chase. I'm sorry, Mel, but I thought I was doing it in this clandestine fashion for your sake.' He forced a smile and paced his hands across his chest in a gesture of absolution.

'Forgive me?'

How could she not? 'And what do these photographs tell us, then?' Mel asked. 'Other than the fact that Trey's boyfriend is still alive and well, despite our assuming the opposite.'

'Did *you* tell him that Mel?'

'No, but I warned him not to go after them. I told him that if Joe survived he might search for Trey one day. I didn't want Trey running off to find them. Those... those creatures would've killed him.'

'Whatever. The fact is, that's the past. This is now and, with Evelyn's help, I'm going to find those twins and get them off Earth for good.'

'Not without me you don't!'

The Doctor got up and crossed the room to stand in front of Mel. 'No, Mel. No. Apart from the fact that they have a psychological effect on you, if either of those youths saw you, they might give the game away.'

‘Doctor,’ Mel said, her eyes widening. ‘In that coat, you’re far more recognisable than me. The twins will spot you from a mile off. And if I remember rightly, they can detect your nonhuman brain waves.’

‘So?’

‘So, I’m coming. And while you’re dealing with the twins, I may be able to break whatever conditioning they’ve got on Joe and Ashley. I’m prepared for it this time.’

‘And I,’ said Evelyn from the kitchen doorway, ‘have made us a lovely picnic for the journey. And the Riley is full of petrol and needs a good chug up to the Peaks, so let’s go.’

She was waving an ornately carved wooden key ring in the shape of a sleeping cat. Hanging from it were various keys, presumably including ones for the front door of the cottage and the car of which she spoke.

The Doctor looked around, trying to find arguments against all or any of these plans. Finally he grabbed his coat, snatched up the papers he’d dropped earlier, whipped the photos from Mel and stormed out of the front door.

‘Well, come on then. What’s the delay?’

‘I’ll get my jacket,’ said Mel and ran upstairs.

Evelyn approached the Doctor. ‘She’s right, by the way.’

‘You lot always are,’ he retorted. ‘And we’ll go in the TARDIS, it’s quicker.’

‘We will not, you know. I’m not setting foot in that until you guarantee me the year two-noughty. The Riley is just over there. C’mon, hitch up your skirts and let’s go.’

As she strode to an old, dilapidated garage beside the cottage, the Doctor let out a long, deep breath. ‘Should’ve left her on the Galapágos. Saved us all a lot of bother.’

‘I heard that,’ Evelyn called back snappily. ‘Teacher’s ears and all that.’

‘Come on, Doctor,’ said Mel as she skipped past. ‘I’ve never been to Derbyshire!’

‘And as for you... ‘ With a last mumbled complaint, very much to

himself this time, the Doctor made for the 1950s Riley as it coughed and wheezed its way backwards out of the garage.

Chapter Eight

Memento

Tim Hall was a very happy man. It was just after midday, and as the weekend approached so did the promise of great parties, lots of booze and, best of all, loads of easy women.

Not that long ago, he'd have felt... not guilty exactly, more cautious really. Bedding loose girls had been just as much fun then, but he'd had to be careful. Deborah had been extraordinarily jealous. And really rather perceptive, which was a shame for Tim. Girls needed two things really, both anatomical. A brain wasn't one of them. Deborah did have brains and their stormy relationship had ended back in September, one wet afternoon on the long seaside walk between Brighton and Hove. They passed the Crazy Golf area when a rather attractive blonde had yelled out 'Hiya Timbo,'

in a silly, giggly voice. Christ knows what her name was, but Deborah suddenly needed that one bit of information above all else. All the way back to Hove, it'd been nag nag nag. 'What's her name? How did she know you? She knew your name, how come you don't know hers?' all said with that pious whine girls used when they felt threatened. Tim knew her name of course. Mandy. Or Maddy. Well something with an M. He'd picked her up at a bash during the week (before Deborah had flown back from Belgium and her oh-so-important conference), scored some coke off her and together they got happy, silly, sexy and eventually (well, actually quite soon after) somewhat physically involved.

Why girls needed to stay in touch, he couldn't understand.

It'd been one night, great sex, OK conversation and a few snorts of coke. But no, she'd rung work a couple of times and he'd said he'd see her, probably at the weekend.

And sure enough he had, at the Crazy Golf as he walked by with his girlfriend.

He'd told Mandy or Maddy or whatever that Deborah existed, but that stupid calling out had done the damage.

By the time they arrived home Deborah was furious, claiming that she

knew about his 'string of whores' and what was the point in carrying on with a relationship based entirely on lies and unkept promises.

What had really hurt was the thing about how much he spent on his habit – so bloody what? It wasn't Deborah's money. Hell, she could afford the flat by herself if she wanted to, he'd said. His money wasn't important to her, surely.

And she had threatened to chuck him out, there and then.

Which was when he saw red. It wasn't his fault – his rages had come on over the last few years and were more and more uncontrollable.

So he'd shoved her – not that hard. And it wasn't avoidable.

She was constantly nagging at him, making a fuss, finding fault. So when she hit the floor with a thud, followed by a quite bizarre crack, and lay there moaning, trying to move or something, Tim just stood and watched.

It turned out she'd smacked her head on the edge of the doorjamb, and cracked her skull open.

'Tim... hospital...' she groaned. 'My head... it hurts...'

Stupid woman, why'd she have to make him angry? She'd tell the hospital, the police or whoever that it was his fault, when it was hers for being a nasty, suspicious, manipulative cow. They'd agree with him, surely. Even policemen knew what women were like.

Then it struck him – he could be free of this!

Ignoring her moans, he ran into their bedroom and yanked out his work briefcase. Inside were three thin cellophane bags full of coke. A few hundred quid's worth, but he could worry about that later.

He grabbed them and went into the kitchen, found a small sharp knife and made a minute perforation in each bag, barely small enough to let the powder escape. By holding all three bags carefully, he made sure none did.

He then pulled open the fridge, took out a can of Woodpecker (vile stuff, couldn't see why she liked it), shook it a bit and then opened it, allowing it to spray over the front of the fridge. He then let it drop to the floor where it bubbled, got out another can and, without shaking it, stepped carefully back into the main room without spilling any

cider on his shoes.

He knelt beside Deborah, who was almost unconscious –

the bleeding had stopped and blood had congealed around the foot of the dinner table.

He opened her mouth, eased a bag of coke into her throat and then poured some cider in. She immediately started gagging, so he forced her mouth shut and held her nose so that she had to swallow the bag. He did this with the other two bags of coke, really quickly although it was difficult with the second one as Deborah was virtually comatose. Nevertheless, the alcohol relaxed her enough for her to swallow automatically.

Tom stood up and dropped the can beside her hand, where it bounced and spread its remaining contents around the floor and on her clothes.

He started counting and after eighteen seconds Deborah convulsed as the bags of coke in her stomach burst, mixed with the alcohol and induced a final seizure.

She began to vomit, turning instinctively, and Tim used his foot to push her on to her back, using no pressure so as not to leave a mark.

The mix of the head trauma, the burst bags of coke and choking on her vomit killed her very unpleasantly, but all Tim could think was that he'd made a rather good job of it.

Showed her who was boss, at least.

Now for the *coups de grâce*.

He nipped back into the bedroom, threw a few of her Tshirts, knickers and a pair of jeans into a holdall, grabbed her Ladyshave and toothbrush from the bathroom, stuffed those into the bag, then returned to the main room and dropped the holdall beside her.

He picked up a big church candle and threw it at a framed picture on the wall they shared with their neighbours, the Parkers. It shattered the glass with a satisfying crash.

'For Christ's sake, Debs,' he yelled. 'Calm down! What d'you mean, you're leaving?'

He paused, then ran to the front door, opened it, kicked it and dashed

outside.

‘Debs, you need help,’ he screamed as loud as he could.

‘You can’t control that amount of stuff. You’re doing it too much!’ Sure enough, the Parkers’ front door opened a bit and he could see them staring at him.

‘No don’t... ‘ he screamed back into his own apartment.

Then he ducked as if dodging something, pulling the door shut at the same time.

‘No!’ he cried. ‘No, Debs, I’ve not got my keys. Let me back in, please!’

The Parkers gave each other a look.

Tim glanced at them. ‘Call the police please,’ he shouted.

‘She’s high or drunk or something. She’s pushed me out and locked the door. I can’t get in!’

Mr Parker went indoors to phone the police and, after a few more seconds of shouting, Tim stopped and pretended to listen at the door. ‘Debs?’ he called. Then more urgently:

‘Deborah!’

He looked at Mrs Parker. ‘Did you hear that? She’s... she’s hurt herself, she’s crying.’ He turned his attention back to the door. ‘Let me in Debs. Debs are you OK?’

He was still trying to get her attention when the police arrived, forced their way in and found Deborah Gilbert dead.

The Parkers backed up Tim’s story as best they could, and the coroner’s verdict was death by misadventure. Tim explained that he suspected Deborah of being a carrier for someone but that she’d never admit it, no matter how much he asked. The court heard how she had swallowed the coke in Belgium, clearly smuggling it for someone, but the bags had burst, as they often did in these cases, and, mixed with the alcohol and the drunken fall, had killed her.

Most of Deborah’s friends didn’t believe this at all and were sure Tim’s temper had led to her death, but there was too little circumstantial evidence for the police to do more than question him a couple of times before having to let him go.

Since then, he'd lived a young, free and single life. He'd moved from the flat, of course. Such trauma, such heartache it caused. And he'd moved to a far nicer one on the seafront itself, just the other side of Brighton towards Kemp Town.

So here he was, three months later, enjoying a lunchtime drink and wondering how many stupid, thick, conversationally impaired bints he could have over the New Year weekend.

'Excuse me,' said a female voice behind him. Quite hard, and well-spoken, not really his type.

'Yo, pretty lady... ' he started to say as he turned towards her – and stopped. There were two women, both very tall, very strong and clearly not his type. Or any man's really.

The one with the cropped blonde hair in the black leather jacket, short black leather skirt and black gloves was seated.

The bald one with the tiny pigtail was incongruously wearing a smart grey business suit and tie. She was the one who had spoken, and she was smiling. 'You work at the hospital, don't you?'

He nodded. 'Junior administrator. Why?'

'We saw you come out,' said the blonde one, whose voice purred seductively. Maybe he had been wrong about these two

– maybe he could have some fun with them. Sexy little sirens looking for a good time after all.

'We're looking for someone,' the pigtailed one said. 'Can you take us to him? We'll make it worth your while,' she added, stroking the side of his cheek and pressing her tongue against the back of her teeth.

Five minutes later they were walking through the staff entrance of the hospital and into admin, where Tim accessed the computer records of the day's admissions.

'That's our friend,' said the blonde, pointing to a patient's name. 'We need five minutes with him, even though it's out of hours. Take us up there and we'll thank you properly after we've had a quick hello.'

Tim needed no second bidding – this was Christmas, birthday and probably Easter all rolled into one. They took the staff elevator to the eighth floor and walked along it. Tim nodded to a couple of nurses,

who very deliberately ignored him, one even turning away, but to him it just meant they were playing hard to get.

‘They all want you, don’t they Tim?’ said the pigtailed one. ‘Who could blame them?’

The blonde one slipped her arm around Tim’s right arm, pigtail hooked her arm around his left one and they entered the small private room.

‘He’s a bit young for you,’ Tim joked, looking at the patient whose records said he was Trey Korte.

The blonde eased the door shut with her heel. ‘He’s just what we’re looking for,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’ She reached forward, sliding a black-painted fingernail between the buttons of Tim’s shirt, just brushing his flesh.

‘Well, ladies, anything else I can do for you? I could always... ‘ He stopped. A new woman had entered the room, power-dressed, slim, with eyes that seemed to ignite the already steamy air in the room.

‘My name is Therése Gavalle,’ said the newcomer. ‘My partners here are Ms de Meanour and Ms Feseance. And on behalf of your poor, sweet friend Deborah, who we read about, we have a message. From her, and from the other young ladies you’ve used and abused over the last few years.’

‘You see Tim – I may call you Tim, mayn’t I?’ purred Ms Feseance, ‘no one truly likes you. We asked around, sought out someone easy to manipulate, who’d do anything if he thought he could... be pleased so readily. Your name came up, so to speak, time and time again.’

‘You’re a user, Tim Hall,’ said Ms de Meanour.

‘And we don’t like you one little bit.’ Ms Feseance’s hand was on Tim’s chest now, tracing a circle around his left nipple, her other hand snaking up his inside leg. ‘Not one little bit.’

And the moment when Ms de Meanour’s hand slapped itself hard and fast over his mouth, to stop him screaming, was when the pain began.

At exactly one-thirty, having failed to get a response from the Doctor, Bob Lines returned to the hospital to see if Trey had woken. Although it wasn’t visiting hours, his police ID got him in, no questions asked, and he met with Dr Wigmore who was looking after Trey.

‘I looked in on him about two hours ago,’ she explained to Lines, ‘and we decided then that he was in deep. I don’t think he’s going to wake for a while yet, Inspector. In cases like his, we’re talking days rather than hours and –’

She stopped. Suddenly in the corridor.

‘What?’ asked Lines, already feeling a cold run down his back.

‘Who shut the door to his room?’ the doctor said slowly.

‘Under no circumstances are doors on this ward to be closed.’

Together they pushed the door open, and Wigmore covered her mouth with her hand.

Bob Lines got his mobile out and called the station. He got through to Stephanie Rowe. ‘He’s gone,’ he said simply.

‘Korte’s gone.’

And lying on the bed, naked and very dead, was Tim Hall.

The hospital went into overdrive as the police arrived, asking patients and nurses if they’d seen anything. Of course, no one had.

‘Who was the dead man?’ Lines asked Wigmore half an hour later.

‘Timothy Hall. A not terribly pleasant member of the administration team. Few people here will miss him, to be honest, but I can’t think who’d want to actually kill him.’

‘Hall... Hall...’ Lines clicked his fingers. ‘Got it.

Girlfriend OD’d a few months ago.’

Wigmore nodded. ‘Everyone here thought he’d killed her, but there was no proof. Do you think this was revenge?’

Lines shrugged. ‘But why take Trey? No, I think he probably led whoever kidnapped Trey into the room and outlived his usefulness. How’d he die?’

Wigmore took a deep breath. ‘It was quite inhuman.

Inspector, there are 206 bones in the human body, from ribs to individual vertebrae. From coccyx to ischium. Tim Hall died as a

result of each and every bone – and I mean every single one no matter where or how small – being snapped two or even three times. And very cleanly. No organs punctured, no internal or external bleeding of any kind. He died very slowly and probably very painfully as someone methodically broke him into little pieces bit by bit.’

‘Quite inhuman’ she had said. Lines was now more convinced than ever that he needed to find the Doctor. This was more than just a police enquiry – this was for someone with a wider purview than that. But why hadn’t the Doctor got in touch?

Despite its creaky appearance and some alarming spots of rust Mel was pleasantly surprised that Evelyn’s old 1950s Riley could, appropriately enough, hit a good 50 m.p.h. without rattling itself apart.

The trouble, as the Doctor pointed out more than once, was that the 50 m.p.h. barrier never wavered. This was fine on the A47 through Kings Lynn, and even out towards Spalding on the A17. But occasionally they sped through a tiny village with a 30 m.p.h. restriction, or went up and down small hills, over tiny brick bridges and infrequent cattle grids at a steady fifty.

‘How did you manage to stay alive all these years, Evelyn?’ asked the Doctor as they caused an old man on a bicycle to wobble when they nipped past him on a single-track lane – a diversion due to roadworks just outside Spalding. Mel looked over her shoulder (boy, was she glad she’d opted for the rear seat) and saw that the old man was, not unreasonably, shaking his fist at them.

‘I could ask you the same question,’ Evelyn laughed. ‘In fact, come to think of it, I frequently did. Never had an accident, you know, in nearly forty years’ driving. Not one.’

‘Probably because they never caught you,’ grumbled the Doctor. ‘Bet there’s a whole host of bewhiskered gentlemen on push-bikes with a story or two to tell.’

Evelyn tapped the map on his lap. ‘Concentrate on the route, thank you, and leave me to concentrate on the road.’

‘With pleasure,’ the Doctor said. ‘Trouble is, every time you tell me to do so your concentration leaves the road and focuses on me!’

Mel decided to keep quiet. She’d engaged in a very similar conversation with the Doctor in 1969 driving back down to Sydney

after he had bought a beach house on, it seemed, a whim. To her knowledge, he'd not intended to go back to it and had let it to a couple of hippies who promised to decorate it. On that particular journey, the Doctor had thrashed the poor Beetle's engine at a ridiculous speed, outrunning a police car just outside Newcastle. Oddly enough, on that occasion the Doctor had pointed out how terribly annoying it was for a driver to have their every decision cross-examined by someone in the passenger seat.

Yes, this was not a good time to bring up hypocrisy, however tempting it might be to do so.

Instead, she leant forward and tapped the Doctor's shoulder. 'What's that noise?'

'What noise?' he asked, then added rather unnecessarily:

'Probably the wing falling off. Or a wheel.'

'I can't hear a noise,' said Evelyn. 'Marvellous old car this, never a thing goes wrong with it.'

Even Mel knew that was tempting fate and, sure enough, the noise got louder. It was a shrill bleeping, and actually sounded more electronic than mechanical. 'Perhaps it's the radio,' Mel offered.

'Radio? Radio? What radio? If there was a radio here, it'd be on,' said the Doctor. 'Anything would be better than listening to Evelyn warble on.'

'I do not warble,' countered Evelyn. 'You just can't bear to be wrong. Never have, never will.'

Mel could see this was going to lead into a very-probably well-rehearsed argument and spoke louder. 'I can hear a bleeping,'

'Oh that,' said Evelyn. 'Probably that thing in the glove compartment.'

The Doctor reached forward, opened the compartment and saw a tiny red globe with a white light flashing from a microbulb on its top.

"Oh that," mimicked the Doctor. 'Yes "that". A calling device. Someone is trying to get hold of you.'

'Me?' Evelyn frowned. 'Unlikely. No one knows I'm here.

Probably for you. Where's yours?'

‘In the TARDIS.’

‘Well, that’s sensible isn’t it. Give all your friends a glorified pager and then leave it at home. Typical man. Aren’t you going to answer it?’

‘It’s not a telephone,’ said the Doctor. ‘Just an alert. I need to work out who it’s from...’ He was unscrewing the globe.

‘Just to see... ah yes, according to the tiny little detector inside, it’s local.’

‘Local?’ asked Mel. ‘Is that Norfolk local, England local or Earth local?’

‘Britain. Which narrows the field considerably.’

‘By how much?’ Evelyn swerved around a pedestrian walking three spaniels, and swung out back on to the main road, their diversion ended.

‘By more than that poor woman narrowly avoided becoming a new hood ornament. Are you sure you actually passed your driving test?’ The Doctor tutted and returned to his work, only to jerk his head up at Evelyn’s response.

‘Passed? When did I ever say I passed? Come to think of it, when did I ever say I’d taken lessons?’

‘Right, that’s it,’ said the Doctor. ‘Pull over. I’m driving from now on.’

‘Whose name is the car insured in?’

The Doctor tried to argue with that, but couldn’t. Instead he pointed out of the window as they drove through Deeping.

‘Railway station. We’ll get the train...’ But they had shot past it, still doing a regular 50 m.p.h., before he could finish.

‘No more train stations for miles,’ Evelyn chortled. ‘And of course I passed my driving test. Really Doctor, you should be used to my kidding by now. You’re worse than old Potter back at university. He took me too seriously as well. And look what happened to him.’

‘What?’ asked Mel and the Doctor at the same time.

‘Oh... Well, some other time. Not now. Not while you’re actually in my car. With me. Driving. Like *he* was.’ Evelyn winked at Mel in the rear-view mirror. ‘It’s better this way,’

she added to the Doctor, who was gripping his seat tightly enough for his knuckles to turn white, the communicator lying abandoned in his lap.

Mel tapped his shoulder. 'I think we should find out who it's from,' she said. 'The message, I mean.'

'What? Oh yes, of course.' The Doctor returned to his work and after a few minutes' quite impressive work with the micro-circuitry he nodded to himself.

'Quite a good job, Doctor, if I say so myself. Turned it into a long-wave positional detector with built-in homing mechanism and personal identification monitor regulator.'

Mel snorted. 'You mean it can tell you who sent the message.'

'That's what I said, Melanie Jane, that is what I said. And it's an old friend of yours. And mine, obviously.'

'Who?'

'Detective Inspector Bob Lines, of East Sussex's finest constabulary. Probably district commissioner by now. Evelyn, if you wouldn't mind?'

'Mind what?'

'Don't be awkward.' The Doctor was pointing at a phone box which they promptly shot past. 'You always do that, don't you?'

'Do what?'

'Expect us mere mortals to read your mind. If you'd said

"Evelyn, please pull over at the nearest phone box" I would have.'

The Doctor put his hands on his heart – his left one. 'Oh Evelyn, sweet, charming Evelyn, please do your old chum the singular honour of stopping at the next telephone kiosk we see so that I may make a telephone call which could be of some importance.'

'That's far nicer,' said Evelyn.

'And while you're at it,' the Doctor continued. 'Lend me ten pence of your Earth money.'

Mel gave up on the two of them. She wasn't sure whether to bash their heads together or book a registry office.

But none of this jocular bonhomie could stop the niggling thought in the back of her mind. Bob Lines was one of her father's oldest friends, and was bound to ask after her. What did she want the Doctor to say?

Bob Lines was back in his office, packing the very last of his personal items, when the telephone rang. He snatched at it faster than he'd ever answered a phone in his life before.

'Lines,'. He nearly thumped the side of his own head with the receiver.

'Sir.' It was Probert in CAD. 'Sir, I've got a... a doctor for you?'

'From the hospital?'

'No, he says he's in Lincolnshire apparently.'

'Put him through, Michelle please. And I'm not to be interrupted until I've finished this call. Even if the Queen Mum pops her clogs, OK?'

'Yes sir.'

There was a slight click and then he heard a voice. 'Bob?

Bob Lines, are you there?'

'Doctor! Doctor, thank you for getting back to me,' Lines paused. 'Er... which one am I talking to by the way?'

He held the receiver further from his ear as the voice exploded: 'Which one? Which one? Which one d'you want?

This one. The right one.'

Oh. *That* one.

'Hello Doctor, long time no hear.'

'Mel sends her love,' said the Doctor.

This threw Lines for a moment – Melanie Bush was, as far as he knew, safely back at home. She'd returned from her travels in space two years ago. Indeed, he'd been the one to meet her, to take her back to her parents. But Lines also knew

– various Doctors had told him at various times – that this kind of thing might well happen. They’d also told him never to give away the future to them, even if it was Lines’ own personal past. Which was even more awkward if he met say the tall curly-haired one, followed by the white-haired one, followed by the tall curly one again. Trying to remember who he’d said what to could be very... difficult.

‘Bob?’

‘Sorry Doctor, it’s that time travel thing again. Doesn’t matter. Tell her I send it back and that everything is fine at home.’

‘She’ll be pleased. Now, what can I do for you?’

‘Doctor, remember when you were last here... the Senénet stuff?’

‘Like yesterday. Which for me, it pretty much was, Why?’

‘Do you remember the young American lad, with the –’

‘Trey? What’s wrong with him?’ The Doctor had suddenly gone very serious.

‘He came to see me this morning, claiming someone was after his mind. His talents I s’pose. Anyway, after saying something about the Magnate he collapsed, went into a coma and I got him to hospital.’

‘Good man,’ said the Doctor encouragingly. ‘The coma was probably self-induced – lots of telepaths do that if they feel their mind is being invaded.’

‘Trouble is, he was kidnapped shortly afterwards, and we haven’t got a clue who by.’

There was a pause. Then: ‘Yes we have. This “Magnate”

whoever – or whatever – that might be. It means nothing to me.’

Bob Lines took a deep breath. ‘Well, I’ve done some fishing around and it sort of means something to us. The police I mean, not East Sussex division particularly. I wasn’t at all surprised to find out that your old friends at C-19 know about the Magnate. I was surprised, however, at how unforthcoming they were about it. I’ve learnt precisely zero except for a call from on high telling me to drop it, let C-19

deal with finding Trey. Apparently he was working for them on

something which may or may not be connected.'

Again silence, although Lines knew the Doctor was probably letting things mull over. Then the pips started, indicating that their time was up.

'I've no more ten pees, Bob. We'll talk again soon. Oh, and Bob?'

'Yes Doctor?'

'Good to talk to you. And happy retirement day!'

'How the devil –' But the phone was dead. The policeman replaced the receiver slowly, and smiled. Good old Doctor, how nice of him to know, even if Lines hadn't a clue how he knew.

There was nothing much left for him to do now except head off to his party, say goodbye to his fellow officers and then go home, hoping that the Doctor would be all right and would find Trey and sort everything out safely.

He took a long look around his office, hauled his bag on to his shoulder and said 'goodbye' one last time. Then he flicked off the light and headed out of his career and into the rest of his life.

Chapter Nine

Shades of Paranoimia

Vice-Marshall Charles Dickinson (rtd) had been slowly edging his way towards the bathroom when the first seizure struck.

Over the past few years his health had been declining but, of course, he had refuted all the warnings and claims by various doctors that he needed to take more care of himself. 'Old warhorses keep going,' he used to tell them. 'Didn't get medals and win wars by giving in at the first sign of a headache.'

'You were a younger man in 1945,' Dr Mahli had tried to explain. 'You're in your mid-eighties now. That's a good age for anyone. Don't throw it away by overdoing it. Let your body have the rest it has earned over the last forty years.'

The vice-marshal had ignored the doctor's advice. Quacks, the lot of them. Knew nothing. Old body's got another twenty-five years in it yet. Military training y'see, building it up, preparing it. The men of

today knew nothing with their gyms and their rabbit food and their energy drinks. All five-minute wonders, and by their mid-thirties they'd be flabby old men, with hearts that'd give out on their fifty-fifth birthdays. But military men – they'd be around nearly twice as long.

When his cleaner, Mrs Bishop, found him immobile on the landing the next morning, lying in a damp pool of pee, humiliated, angry and incapable of moving, she had quite rightly called an ambulance.

So there he was a year later, seated in the drawing room.

Around the room, as indeed around the house both upstairs and downstairs, were little white metallic handles for him to grip hold of as he went from room to room. The old stairs weren't capable of supporting a stairlift, so these wretched handles also populated them, destroying the charm and elegance of the old house. His old bath had been replaced by a newfangled walk-in and sit-down contraption, and every so often someone from social services would pop by to check he was still all right.

Once a rather inept young woman, who probably meant well and had been to university to study social economics, had suggested that she read to him from the local paper.

'God damn it, girl,' Dickinson had thundered, 'it's my legs and my dignity that have been screwed up, not my blasted brain! I can still read.'

He had felt a momentary swell of disappointment within himself as she walked out of the house – it wasn't her fault.

She had tried to be nice.

But damn it, it wasn't his fault either.

He had snatched at the newspaper and tucked it into his dressing gown pocket (he always wore his dressing gown these days unless he was going out – which wasn't very often) and decided to read it on the loo. Social services had suggested having the old linen room by the kitchen converted, but no, the vice-marshal's toilet was upstairs and gave him an excuse to get some exercise.

Before embarking on what was rapidly becoming a mirror image of Hillary's Everest expedition, Dickinson had glanced around his home. Where once there had been Elly, there was a wheelchair. Where once

young Justin had played with toy soldiers, there was now a three-toed grey metallic walking stick.

Where once had stood a proud ex-military man, fighting for his country and later his community, respected and admired, was now a shadow – a thin, embittered decrepit old man, lonely and alone, his body dying as it hung on to his aching bones.

He'd reached the eighth step (counting them was a subconscious second nature to him these days) when he realised his hand wasn't on the small metal handle any more.

He did not remember the handle slipping from his grasp, he did not remember the sensation of moving, falling, dropping.

But as he hit the wooden floor at the base of the stairs, he heard a crack like a gunshot and felt his left leg break in more than one place.

And the one thing that had burnt into his mind as he cried like a baby, screaming for time to speed up and for Mrs Bishop to arrive, was that any shred of dignity, any sliver of self-respect, and any hope he had of remaining inside the comforting walls of what had been his home for the last forty-five years, had gone in the less than three seconds it had taken him to fall.

And so it was that eight months later Charles Dickinson found himself facing Woody Ashtree over a game of chess.

His new friend had an air of mystery that fascinated the vice-marshal more than he could explain.

After the incident with the stairs had forced him to accept that his life at The Gables was over, the vice-marshal had taken control for one last time. He sold the manor house and its contents for a good amount of money. He had a pension as a former wartime serviceman, plus one from his haulage company and by adding these to his now-inflated savings he was able to rent himself a small room on the ground floor of Wessex Downs, the Benevolent Home for ex-military officers and their families in Blandford St Mary.

Since then he'd immersed himself in his life with other old stalwarts who were in varying degrees of dying, with a cheerfulness that astonished him, let alone the nurses and medical staff who hadn't expected him to survive more than a month or two. Oh, he still had days when he felt down, angry at the world, but he was more often than not cheered up by his new love of chess, by reading biographies

of historical warriors and by taking necessarily lengthy walks in the gardens, examining the rose bushes and benches bearing plaques that honoured previous residents of the home who were no longer present.

‘Bishop takes rook.’

‘Knight takes bishop. Check.’ Woody smiled at his friend.

‘Sorry, old man.’

Dickinson flicked his king over – there was no point in drawing his defeat out any longer. He looked at Woody – and beyond him, through the French windows to the lawns. And sighed.

Woody raised an eyebrow. ‘Problems, old son?’

‘No,’ said the vice-marshal. ‘No. Just thinking. Never thought I’d be here, living out my days under care and supervision.’

‘I know what you mean. You imagine one great final strike, going down in a blaze of glory, knowing that what you did counted right up until the end.’ Woody smiled. ‘I wanted that, too. Had it for a while. Used to work for the Air Force Intelligence, y’see. Got involved with some of their weirder jobs, like the Shoreditch incident of ‘63 and the Henlow Downs one in the Seventies. Started to disseminate useful information around the disparate parts of the other intelligence services, made lots of enemies, went through lots of aliases, the whole James Bond routine. Fun while it lasted. Lost track of the fake names, code names, famous names I adopted over the years. Then, one day, that was it. I knew too much about too many people and was fed false information. Didn’t know, got caught by the opposition, took a boat to France – next thing I knew, I was here.’

The vice-marshal stared in confusion at his new friend. ‘I don’t understand.’ Was the man telling him he’d been a spy?

If so, pretty daft of him to start spilling the beans, even here.

Surely that had to be a security risk? Unless... unless old Woody was as daft as they came. Living in his own fantasy world, poor fellah. Made it all up to while away his life down here....

Woody snorted. ‘I know what you’re thinking, but I’m not gaga, you know. Should be – they used their top ESPnets on me, tried to erase my memories, give me a whole new, ignorant identity, but it didn’t work, y’see. Been the government’s “Mr Foot” for too many years to

fall for that.

Oh, certainly there are gaps in my memory – particularly of my French trip, but I learnt a few things.’

‘Such as?’

‘Ever heard of the Magnate?’

‘No.’

‘I’m not surprised. Dodgy covert group. You know the old paranoid ideas? The idea that there’s a shadow government controlling the world – everything we think we believe in, everything we democratically vote for, everything we see around us, on the news, in the papers, everything. Well, it is all controlled, y’see. By the Magnate. Six or seven people – no one knows who they are – literally controlling the world. Most governments, prime ministers, presidents, dictators, kings and queens... They don’t know they’re just puppets, their strings being pulled oh-so-subtly by the Magnate.’

The vice-marshal snorted. ‘That’s ridiculous. Be telling me you know the Son of God is walking amongst us, next.’

Woody Ashtree shrugged. ‘I doubt that. The Magnate wouldn’t let him, far too powerful even for them. The Magnate, Charles, have their insidious little claws everywhere, certainly in our country, in the United Nations, in churches, in schools and in terrorists. Hell, there’s probably a Magnate informer working in this very home, thinking they’re working for a big business, or a mafia cartel, or even the Home Office.

They are everywhere, Charles, and 90 per cent of those working for them don’t even know it. I didn’t, until I went to France. And... ‘ Woody looked up as the nurses began distributing the evening meal,’... and after dinner, I’ll tell you who else I met there. But I need a wee just now, back in a minute.’

The vice-marshal reached out and held Woody’s arm. He smiled, as if goading a drunk to have another drink. ‘Go on, who’d you see?’

Woody glanced over at the nearest nurse who was handing out nice hot lamb, roast spuds, mangetout, gravy and thick mint jelly. He smiled at the vice-marshal. ‘Why, Charles old chap, I met a handsome ex-army officer called Justin Dickinson. Fifteen years after he died, apparently.’ He removed the vice-marshal’s tightening hand from his

arm. 'Eat your greens, Charles, and I'll tell you where to find him after dinner.'

Dumbstruck, Vice-Marshall Charles Dickinson (rtd) watched as Woody Ashtree sauntered off towards the bathroom as if he'd just passed comment on last night's *Coronation Street*.

'Well, what do we do now?'

'Not a clue,' said Shelly Kurtzmann, once again giving the plastic rope around her wrists a tug. 'Are you OK?'

Damien Braun shrugged. 'Fine, I guess. At least they haven't executed me yet. Or sacrificed me to whatever strange god they believe in.'

They'd been stuck in a corner of the stone temple for about eight hours, although twice now they'd been untied, fed, watered and toileted before being silently escorted back to the corner. And their albino guide had vanished, never to be seen again it seemed. Instead, shaven-headed men and women, dressed like Shaolin monks but armed with a variety of knives, machetes and scimitars, were gathered in small groups. Black and white, Asian and western. No one had actually spoken to them, not even a grunt, yet somehow both Damien and Shelly were always able to guess what they were wanting or suggesting.

'How long before the station's chopper gets alarmed?'

asked Shelly.

Damien coughed. 'I don't think they will. They expect things like this to take a couple of days, and I wouldn't be surprised if our white-skinned bud hasn't run back and told them we're dead or something.'

Shelly nudged him – one of the monks, or whatever they were, had separated from the rest and was approaching them, knife in hand. Damien took a deep breath. 'And maybe he'd be right,' he said quietly.

The monk stood in front of them and stared.

'Thank you,' she said. Without opening her mouth.

Both Americans felt their jaws drop open in surprise.

Damien spoke first. 'How... How did you do that?'

'Telepathy,' replied the immobile monk, assuming that explained

everything.

‘Tele-what?’

Shelly however was more considered. ‘You mean, like in the films. Kind of Obi-Wan Kenobi-style?’

Damien looked at her as if she was mad. ‘Yeah, Shell.

Movies. This is real – unfortunately.’ He looked back at the monk. ‘Ventriloquism, yeah?’

But Shelly ignored him. ‘Why are you thanking us?’ she asked the monk.

The monk smiled, and again she spoke only in their heads.

‘You have provided our Lords with a means to communicate to the world.’

Damien shook his head, as if trying to clear it. ‘You’re not from around her, lady, are you? I mean, strip off the robes, chuck away the knife, and what’ve you got?’

‘I am Ini-Ma,’ she said in their heads. ‘But once I was Loretta van Cheaden. Until the Lord rescued me and brought me here from the streets of sin. I am here to do his bidding. As are you.’

‘Difference is, girlfriend,’ snapped Shelly, ‘you *want* to help him. Daym and I are here against our will.’

The monk shrugged, but kept smiling. ‘Not for long, my friends. Soon the blue light will show you the right path. Just as it did me. I waited many years for the Lord’s return and have been rewarded.’ She waved her hand towards the rest of the men and women who made up the monks. ‘As we all have.

The blue light will save you, too.’

Damien shook his head slowly. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Shelly... ‘

Mel sighed inwardly and continued to stare at the trees, fields and occasional Little Chefs that Evelyn’s Riley passed. Where, at first, she had found Evelyn and the Doctor’s war of words amusing, she now found it tedious. Where she had found Evelyn’s old car, its lack of speed and its bumps and noises charming, she now found it annoying.

Where she had felt pleasure at simply being on her home planet, in her own country, she now found it grating. Evelyn refused to use motorways – the other drivers were too dangerous, too childlike and too concerned with their own destinations to worry about anyone else.

True, but it did mean that this journey was taking a day rather than a few hours, and whilst the supposed grown-ups could amuse each other with their sparring, Mel was bored out of her brain.

The Doctor had reported back what Bob Lines had said (good to know mum and dad were OK, but Trey was a worry), and Mel was left to consider who or what the Magnate was. A brief few minutes of serious discussion between her two companions revealed that Evelyn hadn't heard of them, either in 1993 or 2000, which meant they had still been very hush-hush, or gone.

'Doctor,' Mel finally volunteered. 'Doctor, do you remember when we were in London, facing down the Codex?'

'Yes, Mel.'

'Leonor and Julia took me into an internet café. If we went to one of those now, I could try downloading some information about the Magnate.'

'Good idea, Mel,' said the Doctor.

'Bad idea, Mel,' countered Evelyn.

Mel sighed – why wasn't she surprised at Evelyn's reaction? 'Why's that, Dr Smythe?'

'This is 1993 – the fad that is the internet is only just growing out of universities and into people's homes. The concept of a non-London high street café with a bank of PCs won't come up for at least two more years.'

'Fine. Let's go to a university.'

Evelyn caught Mel's eye with a look in her rear-view mirror. 'We can't just march in to a uni in the middle of the Christmas break and demand net access, Mel.'

'Why not? You're a stuffy old lecturer, I'm your backward niece and a student who needs to catch up on her essays because she's been sick for the last few months.'

Mel could see Evelyn glance at the Doctor. ‘It might work.’

‘It couldn’t hurt,’ he responded. ‘Which university is nearest?’

‘York,’ said Mel.

‘Sheffield,’ said Evelyn quickly. ‘Oh, that’s much closer, and it’s on our way to the Peaks. And it has a fabulous library, with a brand-new computer system that’ll be just right for what Mel needs. Really.’

Mel glanced at the AA road atlas beside her. She wasn’t entirely convinced that Evelyn was right. But if they went straight up the A15, through Lincoln and then into Sheffield on the A57...

About an hour’s drive in a normal car, but about another three in Evelyn’s.

Nice lady, decided Mel, but she was beginning to be a hindrance rather than a help.

Malvern Hall was, as family estates go, not quite as grand as it sounded. It lacked the ten acres of sculptured flower gardens full of roses, fountains and Peak walkers needing a break. It lacked the stables and yards full of horses and sheep to keep the younger tourists amused. And it lacked the extensive garages, packed with the vintage cars so beloved of granddads and great-uncles eager not to tire themselves out wandering around rose bushes or feeding sugar lumps to Ol’ Neddy while Belinda and Josh’s latest hugged the animal’s mane and tried to avoid toppling into its food trough.

But for Sebastian Malvern, latest in the long line of Malverns who had lived there, the hall, situated 438 feet above sea level, alone on a neb, was more than adequate. It was an old stone building, completed in 1649 and constructed using local materials and local labour. As each subsequent lord of the manor became its master, the hall gained something new.

Sebastian’s father had built (or rather had told his servants to build) an ornate gateway with fifteen-foot wrought-iron gates at the end of the mile-long driveway, where it met the A6013.

Sebastian’s contribution, completed just a few months ago, was to adorn the west side of Noe Knoll with a Japanese garden inspired by the one Lord Leverhulme had erected near Rivington. Sebastian Malvern had a love of all things Micronesian – a love he had acquired during an overseas trip there as a student in the early Seventies.

Indeed, some of his parents' servants muttered in Halcham village that the trip had changed young Sebastian a lot – no one truly knew him any longer, least of all, apparently, his parents.

When Lord and Lady Malvern died in a car crash returning from London where Lady Patricia had been presented with the MBE for her services to the Women's Institute, the village went into mourning. That mourning took another turn when Sebastian, unmarried, opted to release most of the servants from their duties, keeping on only Josh Harper and his son to maintain the grounds, and Minter, his father's butler, who he used more as a private secretary. Minter had passed away eight years later and not been replaced.

The only person Sebastian saw socially with any regularity

– and even that was only once every few months – was Reverend Cummings. Thus only the vicar had any real idea what life at the hall was like. And, loyal as always to the village 'squire', Cummings' lips were sealed.

Sebastian had decreed that, unlike his father, he was not to be known as Lord Malvern. He was simply Mr Malvern to all and sundry – a rejection of his hereditary peerage that, whilst shocking the villagers, made sense when you considered that his chosen line of work was charitable deeds, setting up clinics and hospices for the lost and lonely, and funding research for medical universities. Thus, when he invited the Irish twins and their three charges to live in Halcham no one had been the least bit surprised.

As dusk began to settle over the lower Peaks Sebastian Malvern gazed out of one of the double-glazed windows, looking down upon the village nestled in the valley below.

Twinkling orange lights reminded him that the hundred or so people down there held him in some kind of ridiculous awe.

'Why do they need to be led so?' he said softly, more to himself than anyone else. 'Why does humanity require itself to be spoon-fed?'

'Weak minds,' came the reply from behind him.

Malvern shook his head but didn't turn. 'No, not weak.

Untrained. Undeveloped even. But, given the right push, they could be very, very strong.'

‘And that is why they are dangerous and must be controlled – given the impression of freedom. That is why you must remain here. As their leader.’

Sebastian sighed. ‘We... they could achieve so much. The potential is there.’

‘There is no greater responsibility than potential,’ replied the voice. ‘And you have more potential than all of them put together. That is why we have given you this responsibility.’

Malvern finally turned round, facing in the direction of the voice. It was a thin column of blue light, hovering between the far wall and his desk, close to the red leather chair he liked to sit in when he worked. Malvern smiled wryly as he imagined the blue light trying to sit in it.

Tendrils of thin blue electricity crackled around the edges of the column, flickering in time with the speech.

‘And,’ the voice continued, ‘Kyto-Ma, you now have an additional responsibility. A human telepath is being delivered to you tonight.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Indeed. You will ensure his safety and his health for one night. Tomorrow, he will be taken to France to replace Dudley.’

Malvern shrugged. ‘Why replace him?’

‘Dudley was... is... a very powerful telepath. A rarity amongst ones already rare, just like you. We have assimilated his power to strengthen our own. It is necessary to convince the Network that we are all still on the same... side. Thus, we will help them replace their missing agent. You will receive him and his companions in one hour, Kyto-Ma. They will be in France by midday tomorrow, the telepath in place by early the next morning. European time. For us, it will be a much more convenient time.’

And with a final crackle, the blue column of light vanished. Sebastian Malvern barely moved for sixty minutes, beyond walking around his study a couple of times. He glanced up at the grandfather clock as it chimed 6 p.m. And instantly, there was a knock on the door.

Malvern quickly descended the stairs and opened the front door.

Facing him were two very tall, very broad, aggressive-looking women.

Between them was a smaller, well-dressed Mediterranean type who offered him her hand.

‘Therése Gavalle,’ she said quickly, ‘My associates are –’

‘Ms de Meanour and Ms Feasance, I know,’ said Malvern.

‘I gather the three of you are staying the night.’ He pointed to the left wing of the house. ‘Excellent rooms await you – take your pick.’ He looked at the Amazonian types. ‘There are a couple of doubles.’ It pleased him slightly to see that Gavalle was uncomfortable at the idea of the other two together.

‘There is another,’ Gavalle began, but Malvern interrupted her. ‘The telepath does not stay here. There are experts at dealing with his kind in the village. I have... contacted them.’

They will arrive soon, take him and look after him. They will return him at dawn tomorrow so you can all go to Paris. I’m sure the enigmatic Mr Doe will be pleased to have you all back.’

Gavalle stood where she was. ‘My orders are to look after the boy.’

Malvern shrugged and sounded indifferent. ‘My orders come from the people who give your superiors their orders.’

It’s getting cold, and this building costs me a fortune in central-heating bills. It is not for debate. Do you require food before you retire?’

‘It is only six o’clock,’ snapped Gavalle.

Malvern ignored what she said and looked beyond her to where a white 1950s American S & S Cadillac that had been converted to an ambulance was purring up the drive.

‘Your charge’s lift has arrived. I suggest you hand him over to Ciara and Cellian. They will take good care of him.’

Gavalle suddenly clicked her fingers, and Ms de Meanour and Ms Feasance took a step towards Malvern. Malvern snorted derisively and shot them both a quick look.

Gavalle couldn’t hide her annoyance as her two henchwomen backed down, directly defying her unspoken order.

‘Oh, don’t fret, Captain,’ smiled Malvern. ‘Your chums here have spent

long enough at the Network to recognise power when they sense it. Didn't Doe tell you, *mon Capitaine*? You are facing one of the most powerful ESPnets in the world. I'm a High Class 12 telepath, a first-rate telekinetic and an absolutely wizard psychometric. Just so you know who you're dealing with. Now I suggest you allow the Irish twins there to take your special-weapon boy with them, and you come in, eat, drink and relax before bedtime. Or I shall rupture every blood vessel in your brain. And theirs.'

Malvern nodded at the two Amazonians. 'Up to you, *ma petite*, up to you.'

It was close to 9.30 p.m. when Vice-Marshal Charles Dickinson (rtd) made his discovery. He knew the time because the old clock in the library had chimed a few minutes ago and everyone knew it was a few minutes fast. Some suggested it was an old nurses' trick to get people to bed that bit earlier.

Others thought it was just a ploy to confuse everyone. One or two maintained it was Mussolini's revenge and that he'd used the same tactic to get the trains to run on time. But then, they were the sorts who dribbled their stew unchewed back into their bowls and threw things at the TV whenever the BBC

repeated *Where Eagles Dare* in the afternoons after *Neighbours*. Which was rather too often, the vice-marshal had observed.

Although none of this was as unforgivable as the fact that he actually watched *Neighbours* himself. Daily. The builder's wife reminded him of Elly. Bit of a spitfire that one.

Anyway, the nurses had started wheeling the more...

reactionary residents off to bed, leaving good old boys like him to stay up late and enjoy the snooker in peace.

Peace. Ha, that was a laugh. He'd not had a moment's peace since Woody had made his daft comment about Justin before dinner. It had to be daft. Justin was dead. Woody was as loony as the others. Had to be.

So why did he want more information? Why did he need to find Woody and get him to explain what he meant? And where was he? His dinner had been served, but Woody hadn't come back from the loo to eat it!

He found Woody just after half-past nine, in the toilet cubicle.

At first, the vice-marshal assumed he'd tripped over and banged his head, knocked himself senseless, but as he leant down to shake his friend awake he saw a hypodermic syringe roll away. 'Nurse!' he yelled. 'Nurse, quickly!'

Seconds later two nurses arrived, one male, one female.

They set about trying to revive Woody but it was clearly to no avail.

It briefly crossed the vice-marshal's mind that he didn't actually recognise the nurses, and that they must have been right outside the door when he called. But that was lucky, because there might be a chance to... well, a chance to save Woody.

However, within five minutes, they were lifting him on to a gurney, having tried CPR and everything they could. The vice-marshal had seen enough death in his time – he knew it was hopeless. As he watched his new friend being wheeled away while a nurse scurried off with the hypo to diagnose its contents, he sat on the toilet and let his face fall into his hands.

And saw the envelope tucked just under the seat. He stood up and lifted the seat carefully, making sure the envelope didn't drop into the bowl.

OL' DICKY CHAS

The vice-marshal hadn't gone by that nickname since the bloody war – how the hell could Woody have known that?

He was about to open the letter when he thought better of it, tucked it into his trouser top which was hidden by his dressing gown, and wandered back to his room. He told one of the nurses that he was feeling a bit shocked at Woody's death and would see her in the morning.

He shut his bedroom door behind him but couldn't lock it.

They didn't like locked doors in the home – a safety measure.

If you became ill at night and no one could get to you... well, you were a goner.

Bugger 'em.

He shoved a small chair under the handle to make sure the door couldn't be opened, sat on his bed and read the letter.

Hello chum

Been meaning to give you this since I met you. Been following you for a couple of years now, waiting for the right time for both of us.

If you're reading this, then 'Mr Fixit' has been retired.

Permanently I expect. Don't grieve old man. Not worth it. Had fun, done my bit for king and country. Probably been shut up by this wretched government – they hate people talking about the cloak and dagger stuff Remember Spycatcher? Poor old Peter...

Listen old chum – your boy is alive and kicking. Now.

Only he might not be too sure of who he is, or who you are or anything. Heard stories, y'see. Odd place. If you're up to the risk, I suggest you go and find him. In Paris. Something called the Network. I can't remember how I came by this – done so many undercover jobs now, don't even remember my real name but it's certainly not Ashtree. Stupid name. One of my rugger chums from school actually. Bought it at Dunkerque if I remember rightly.

Your lad was in UNIT – special security black ops stuff cold war and beyond. Old Jonnie Sudbury's lot. Terrible card player. After he died, I got assigned to tracing a few of his...

well, loose ends. Discovered all about some place called the Bunker, up north. Got closed down in the mid-Seventies, lots of stuff hidden there was transferred around the world, more of it stolen. Later turned up in Sussex, some way along the coast from here. UNIT sorted it.

But then there's the Network – similar black ops stuff in Paris, based somewhere underground. Literally I mean. Go to the catacombs and think about your old training. Secret societies, they're the same the world over.

Sudbury was trying to expose it as a bad lot when his heart gave out. Sudbury was a very fit man, old bean. Bloody excellent health – heart least of his worries. I think they did the old needle-full-of-air-create-an-embolism trick. Popular one with black ops types, you know

This is something very big and dangerous. Dangerous enough for 'em to get rid of Sudbury, and, if you're reading this before New Year's Day, when I plan to slip away and become someone new somewhere else, then they've

got rid of me, too.

If it's 1994 as you read this, get out of Wessex Downs and I'll try and contact you soon.

Let's crack open this Network together, get Justin home and have a drink in the Clay Pigeon, yes?

If I'm dead, it's up to you. I won't pretend it's safe – if I'm in the morgue, you know that already. But maybe, either way, it's better to go out fighting than rot away in this place, however lovely it is (and, having gone undercover in a number of places like this, ol'WD is pretty darn good).

White knight takes black king, yes?

A Friend

The vice-marshal put the paper between the pages of his Bible, moved the chair away from the door and lay on his bed. He'd not sleep, he knew that.

But he would think. Long and hard.

Chapter Ten

No Sun

It was nine-thirty in the evening by the time they reached Sheffield. The main university complex was conveniently situated near to the British Rail station ('Ah, good old British Rail,' sighed the Doctor. 'You'll miss them when they've gone,' he told a bewildered Mel).

'Well, there's no point in going in now,' said Evelyn reasonably as she stared at the locked glass doors to the main reception area. 'Why don't we find somewhere to kip for the night, and have a jolly bash at it all tomorrow?'

'There's that pub right by the station,' Mel remembered.

'Where we parked the car. I'm sure it had rooms as well, and we wouldn't have to move the car after closing time, either.'

'Quite right,' said Evelyn. 'I don't want anyone messing with my car.'

'No, of course not,' muttered the Doctor. 'They might try and steal it. Worse, they might actually steal it, realise it's a pile of junk and bring it back.'

Evelyn ignored him. ‘What do you think, Mel dear?’

Mel shrugged. ‘A lie-down would be good.’

‘Dinner would be good,’ countered the Doctor.

‘Dinner!?’

‘Doctor! Really,’ added Mel. ‘We’ve had dinner.’

The Doctor looked shocked. ‘Dinner? That wasn’t dinner.

That was a snack. *Un petit repas*, to prepare the palate for the splendours yet to come.’

Evelyn shook her head. ‘Gammon, chips, peas and pineapple followed by Bakewell tart. With cream. A pot of tea for two. For one. And toast. Half an hour ago.’

‘It was not half an hour ago.’ The Doctor looked away from them. ‘It was over an hour.’

‘It was forty-five minutes exactly, Doctor,’ said Mel. ‘I noted the time as we left.’

‘Oh I might have known you’d gang up with old mother Smythe there.’

“‘Old Mother” who?’ Evelyn looked at him through screwed-up eyes. ‘You know what, Doctor? When I stepped out of that police box of yours for the last time, five years ago, I swore that if you ever turned up on my doorstep I would never, ever have anything further to do with you unless you were guaranteeing me a trip home. For some reason, here I am. Miles from home, exhausted, tired and out of pocket after filling up four times with petrol. Oh it’s all right for young Mel here – she’s thirty years younger than me, full of beans, energy and enthusiasm. And you. Well, you may be getting steadily closer to the big ten double-oh, but let’s face it, you’ve got an eternity to go before real old age hits you. But what have I got, eh? No home, no roots, no family. My only connection to my former life is you. When you took me to Gallifrey, I wish I’d got hold of a dictionary and looked up the word “unreliable”. Spelt D-O-C-T-O-R, no doubt.’

Mel almost pointed out that she’d never been taken to Gallifrey, but realised this wasn’t the moment. Instead, to break up the bad atmosphere as best she could, she started walking back towards the

railway station. ‘Well,’ she said as lightly as possible, ‘who’s for The Railwayman’s Arms?’

But that didn’t help. Evelyn was in full-on moan mode now.. although Mel had to note it wasn’t entirely unjustified.

‘And who is going to pay for that, eh? I would remind you both that as someone who doesn’t officially exist I don’t have a cheque book, credit card or even a bank account. Everything I do, I have to get cash in hand – most of which has been spent on fuel today.’ Evelyn overtook Mel, and stomped back towards the station.

The Doctor looked at Mel, genuinely hurt and confused. ‘I only said “old mother” as a joke.’

Mel touched his arm gently. ‘I know, and so does she. But there are unresolved problems between you two, I think. And I’m not sure I’m the one to solve them. It’s up to you.’

‘No it’s not, it’s up to her.’ The Doctor sat on a small brick wall, and kicked his heels. ‘She is a sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated by the exuberance of her own voice.’

‘Oh yes, Doctor. That’s Evelyn through and through. Not an epithet that could be applied to anyone else around here, is it?’

The Doctor pouted and looked at Mel. ‘Don’t know what you mean, Mel. You shouldn’t put yourself down so.’

‘*Doctor...*’

‘Oh all right, I’ll apologise. Come on.’ He got up but Mel gently held him back from following Evelyn.

‘Doctor, why?’

‘Why what?’

Mel shrugged. ‘I know you’ve travelled with lots of people during your lifetimes, but why her? She’s not... how can I put this in a completely non-self-derogatory-way... She’s not a typical Doctor fellow traveller is she? As she so rightly said, she’s thirty years older than me for starters.’

The Doctor sighed and put his hands in his pockets. ‘I didn’t really choose her, you know, any more than I chose you, or Peri or Tegan

or-'

'Doctor!'

'Sorry, yes, right.' He sighed again. 'It's difficult to explain. Over the years, as you say, the TARDIS has been home to a large number of people other than myself. For the most part I liked them, they liked me, we faced danger, we had fun but eventually one or other of us realised it was time to move on. And when they went, I was sad. We were friends but I knew it was the best thing for them. I suppose as time went on, I got slightly hardened to it – one day they'd tell me they had met someone, or found something worthwhile to stay to do, or been given an opportunity to go home by a more direct route than me and the TARDIS. And I'd say goodbye and move on. But Evelyn... Evelyn was different. For the first time in some years, I met someone who was, well, an equal. Evelyn didn't need rescuing too often – I can remember one or two ferocious creatures that needed rescuing from her. She used her brains, her wit and experience to get out of any real trouble and we faced things together. She'd had a lot of life experience you see – she was divorced, she had spent most of her life dealing with younger people, her students. Nothing fazed her.' He laughed. 'She even held her own against an entire Dalek army once. We read the same books, laughed at the same jokes. There was an unspoken respect and equality between us, I suppose. She could make analogous deductions no matter what planet we were on, who we were running from, or sharing dinner with, or shaping the political structure of.

And then one day, out of the blue, she said she wanted to stop.

Wanted to go home. She'd seen it as a holiday, a break from normality with a good chum along for the ride, but her visa had expired.'

He looked up into the cold night sky, clear of clouds, and Mel realised he was gazing directly at the stars. How many of them could he name? How many of them had planets circling them, loaded with memories of Evelyn and the others?

For the first time since she had known him, Mel saw the Doctor in a new light. Oh, she had always known that the

'outrage' and the 'over-the-top overreaction' was pretty much an act, a masque. But she had always put that down to him feigning self-mockery, and to that little bit of the teacher in him that wanted to see Mel come to her own conclusions about situations. Never before had she seen that it also covered a very basic sadness. The Doctor was

terribly, terribly lonely and maybe Evelyn had provided a companionship that went beyond just being someone in the TARDIS to talk to, laugh and joke with, and care for. Maybe she was someone to care *about*.

‘To be honest, Mel, when Evelyn said she wanted out, I was just terribly, terribly hurt and like all people who get hurt

– people who, as I said to you before, can’t wear their inner emotions on their sleeve – I found a way to lash out.’

‘You abandoned her here to teach her a lesson?’

The Doctor stared back at her in horror. ‘No. No, no, no. I didn’t even know this was the wrong time at first. Oh, please, you mustn’t think that because... well, because... ‘

Mel took a deep breath. ‘I think you did, Doctor. Or rather, I think the TARDIS did. You always say it’s alive. Well, if it saw you hurt, distressed and sad, maybe it brought Evelyn to 1988 rather than 2000. But it must have got that idea, on a subconscious level, from you.’

The Doctor looked away from Mel, staring at his feet, and said nothing for a few minutes. Then he smiled weakly at his young friend. ‘I expect Evelyn has bought a round of Guinness for her, a ginger pop for me and some juice for you, and if we don’t get there soon she’ll have put whatever change she has left into a one-armed bandit.’

She linked her arm with his. ‘Come on then, let’s have that drink and then worry about how you’re going to apologise to her.’

As they began walking towards the station, the Doctor frowned. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘What?’

‘I thought I heard something? Someone... someone calling out to me?’

‘I didn’t hear a thing, especially over this traffic.’ She nudged him. ‘Probably your tummy telling you it needs filling!’

With a laugh, they reached the pub and headed into it.

Sure enough, there was Evelyn. She’d moved on and was all welcoming smiles, with drinks spread around the table.

Also on the table was a pile of £1 coins.

She waved towards a machine in the corner – it was an electronic quiz machine.

‘Stupid thing thought it could outdo me,’ she snorted. ‘I put in three pounds, I’ve won twenty. Won’t pay for the rooms, but it’ll buy us a bit of food.’

The Doctor swigged his drink, gratefully. ‘I’ll see if they’ve got any rooms.’

‘Already booked,’ said Evelyn. ‘Three rooms at a cheap rate. I pleaded Christmas poverty, and promised that if they gave us rooms at the inn we guaranteed them three shepherds and a couple of wise men before Thursday.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Evelyn Smythe, your efficiency leaves me speechless.’

‘Well, that’s one plan that worked, then,’ she replied, winking at Mel.

Mel laughed. ‘Still, how do we pay?’

The Doctor patted his pockets. ‘Cheque book is in here somewhere, I’m sure.’ He produced a ball of string, a commemorative mug from the wedding of Euan and Eugenie, a pair of sunglasses and a stick of Blackpool rock from one pocket. From the other, out came a key ring and innumerable keys, a paperback titled *Toghill Sheepfarming in the Eighteenth Century*, a newspaper, a box of paper clips and an unopened bag of liquorice allsorts that was actually filled with flower petals. ‘No cheque book.’

‘Inside pocket?’ suggested Mel.

‘This jacket would never be so gauche as to have an inside pocket, Mel. This is a classic.’

Mel yanked open the coat and, sure enough, there were at least four inside pockets. One of these, quite impossibly but nevertheless there for all to see, had a screw-topped jam jar in it. And inside that was the elusive cheque book.

With a look that spoke volumes, Mel silently unscrewed the lid, removed the cheque book, passed the jar back and headed for the reception.

‘Cheque guarantee card?’ suggested Evelyn.

‘It’s Coutts,’ said the Doctor.

‘Yes, but this isn’t Threadneedle Street in the nineteenth century, Doctor.’

Nevertheless Mel returned a moment later, quietly eased back the Doctor’s coat again and withdrew a guarantee card from his waistcoat pocket.

‘How did you know?’ asked Evelyn.

‘The cheque book told me,’ Mel muttered, and wandered off.

‘Well,’ said Evelyn, ‘I only asked.’

‘No,’ explained the Doctor, ‘she’s right. The cheques are made from paper especially imported from the planet Arborius, where all the trees are sentient. Thus, so is their... ‘

‘... paper,’ finished Evelyn. ‘Of course. I should have guessed.’

Mel returned and sat down. ‘I’m not sure who was more surprised. The young man at the desk when he heard the cheque ask for the card and then say thank you as I signed, or me when I actually realised it spoke and it wasn’t you doing your ventriloquist act behind me.’ She downed her juice in one gulp. ‘Any other surprises I should know about, Doctor?’

Chapter Eleven

Dreaming in Colour

Ciara was dreaming. Again.

She saw a house – one she recognised. A big manor house, down in Sussex. She saw the thin-faced man with a scar engulfed in flames, screaming as layers of artificial components were stripped and melted from his body before what was left of his natural form boiled and bubbled away.

She saw a huge woman in a medical uniform, white suit, white apron, white cap. She saw the woman split down the middle to reveal three glowing purple spheres of pulsating light.

The light spheres talked to Ciara, calling to her before they were snuffed out by a stronger mental force. She saw them darken and shatter under the onslaught, and felt their connection to her mind

snap, freeing her from their domination. They were linked to the prosthetics that lined her own body – the fake skin, fake nerves, built-in energy gun, augmented sight and hearing. And basic telepathic powers.

She was free of the spheres, but still had their technology. She was free of their domination, but now had her conscience. She was free of their evil, but still had the guilt.

And she awoke with a start. Cellian was on the next bed, untroubled. Their charges slept in the rooms below, presumably also untroubled. But at the foot of her bed, wrapped in a hospital blanket, was the shivering, sweating form of a young human male coming out of a self-induced coma.

The one she and Cellian had collected from Mr Malvern earlier.

She almost recognised the face. Something about it touched her memory. But it was the mind she was reading, the mind that in sleep had connected with hers.

It was the same mind that had destroyed the energy spheres and given her back her existence.

And it was a mind searching for the person she was searching for. The mind had screamed in its unconscious state just one word.

Doctor.

Just as hers had last night.

He was here. On Earth. And this boy might... must... help draw the Doctor to them.

The Doctor would bring salvation. The Doctor would understand what was being attempted now.

And hopefully, he would provide the means to redemption.

The boy twisted once more in his comatose state before mercifully dropping into a fitful, deep but wholly normal sleep.

Ciara found herself watching him for the next few hours until the dawn began and heralded 31 December 1993.

And the beginning of the end of everything...

For John Doe, the day began in anger. Days frequently did, it has to be pointed out, but this one was slightly different. The anger wasn't directed at Christophe Brel and his Network employees. It wasn't directed at the ESPnets and their failure to find the Magnate's missing person.

Nor was it directed at the cold tea which he had knocked over in his waking and which was spreading over his grey desk.

It was directed at himself and, more importantly, his dreams.

It had to be something to do with being in close proximity to the ESPnets for so long – maybe they were accidentally breaking down the barriers in his mind.

Whatever it was, last night, for the first time in ages (well, that he could recall) he had dreamt about his past life.

He had pictured himself – from his own point of view –

walking along a driveway. Past a sign saying UNIT – No Unauthorised Entry. A soldier had seen him, but didn't challenge him. He had smiled at him and saluted. If the soldier was a private, then presumably Doe had possessed some kind of rank within UNIT. He had entered the building, heading somewhere he knew.

He went through a door – yes, he was in a laboratory. The Doctor's laboratory.

The Doctor. Tall, ruffled white hair, into velvet jackets.

Austere and occasionally grumpy. Powerfully intelligent and capable of generosity.

The Doctor. The lab. The Doctor wasn't there. Nor the Brigadier. Nor... nor the girl he liked.

The girl he wanted to see?

The girl he had had romantic feelings for?

Who was the girl, how did he know her? She wasn't a member of UNIT – he could picture her too well for that.

Short dark hair, blue eyes, gorgeous smile. Dark brown trouser suit.

Gorgeous smile.

Smiley.

Smiley-Jane.

Sarah Jane!

Her name was Sarah Jane and they were lovers?

No... no, not that. But he wanted them to be. He was hoping to see her in the Doctor's lab because when she visited UNIT that's where she went.

In the lab was a machine. A big screen on a trolley.

Attached to it, a pair of headphones. Was it some kind of TV set, with stereo headphones for sound?

He had walked to it – no one was around to stop him. Still, it seemed that he was a UNIT bigwig, so why would anyone stop him?

He put the headphones on, turned on the television...

Yes... yes... it was coming back now?

Who was he? The screen showed something... it showed him! Showed his face but it was unclear... indistinct. He needed to focus on the screen...

No! No, the pain, pain in his head, it had been too much.

He'd begun yelling, screaming...

Someone grabbed him not the Doctor... it was the Brigadier! Bloody Lethbridge-Stewart – he had set a trap for him! Yes, that was it. Using the Doctor's toys they'd trapped him, they'd destroyed his mind!

They'd tried to kill J... J... John Doe.

No, that wasn't his name! That's what he called himself later!

Damn!

Doe slammed his fist on the desk top. Damn, damn, damn!

For more than ten years now he'd been without an identity and last night, for the first time, he'd been given a glimpse of his past life.

It was fading. Already he couldn't remember... couldn't remember...

What had he been trying to remember?

Oh, he'd been asleep and knocked over a mug of tea. That must be what he was cross about.

Spilt cold tea.

He looked up at the clock. In a couple of hours, that French woman... what was her name? He took a piece of paper out from his breast pocket: French Captain = Gavalle. Yes, Gavalle. She would be picked up by a plane and flown down to Paris from the north-west of England, bringing with her his latest ESPnet.

Better go and tell Brel.

As he got up and ran his fingers through his hair, he frowned suddenly. There was something he had been trying to remember.

It was there, on the tip of his mind, like a fading dream.

Except of course he didn't dream.

Not once since... Well, whatever it was had destroyed his mind at UNIT.

The drawback to being on the ground floor of the home was that the TV room wasn't too far off. Of course, the rooms all had their own TVs, but the home encouraged the community feel by having a designated lounge where everyone could watch things together. Fine for football and cricket. Not so good when you're woken by the wretched music, if that's the right term, that introduced Richard and Judy.

Still, Vice-Marshall Charles Dickinson (rtd) had overslept an hour or so longer than normal. He showered and dressed and made his way towards the lounge. As he passed the duty nurse's cubicle he decided to nip in and see Nurse Jane and ask about Woody. Or whoever. Find out what he died from.

Except Nurse Jane wasn't there. Instead, a severe older woman sat in her place rummaging through some diaries and prescription books.

'Ah, morning,' he said jovially. 'Sorry, Jane not around today?'

The newcomer looked up at him, not sharing his mood.

‘On a course. Everyone is. For three days. We’re auxiliary staff.’

‘What, everyone?’

‘Everyone.’

‘Porters? Cleaners?’

The nurse sighed. ‘Everyone. Is there something you want in particular, Mr Dickinson?’

‘No, not really,’ he said. ‘Well, Woody Ashtree. Died last night. Just wondered if anyone knew what from?’

The nurse frowned and flicked through her books. ‘No reports in the duty logs of a resident passing away. What name was it?’

The vice-marshal thought for a moment. How could it not have been logged? Apart from the death itself, surely the ambulance staff who had been called would have signed themselves out. Private residential homes required visitors to do that. ‘Ashtree. Don’t know his Christian name, we all called him Woody.’

The nurse gave a rather cursory look at the diary and logs again, then shook her head. ‘No, sorry. Are you sure he died?’

‘Well, is he in his room this morning?’

She consulted her books again, with a more audible sigh this time. ‘No Ashtree here, I’m afraid. Are you sure the name is right?’

‘May I?’ He reached out for the entry book which listed all the residents and their rooms. He scanned down. Bobby, Bill, Reggie, Gordon... Everyone was there, except Woody. He scanned the room numbers.

‘There’s no room 8,’ he said. ‘Why not?’

The nurse shrugged. ‘Don’t know. I’m just a temp I’m afraid.’ The vice-marshal thanked her and decided to go upstairs, to Woody’s room. Six. Seven. There: eight. He tapped on the door but there was no answer. He opened it – no one kept their rooms locked.

It wasn’t Woody’s room any more. In fact, it looked as if it never had been.

It was a storeroom. The walls were lined with shelves full of log

books, box files and ring binders. Apart from the window, every spare inch of wall was covered with shelves.

And not freestanding ones – these were wall-mounted. In the centre of the room was a photocopier and a small desk was positioned just below the window.

But that was absurd. Only yesterday morning he'd been in here with Woody, having a cup of tea and discussing England's dismal record in test matches over the last few years.

'We need another Ian Botham,' Woody had said, and promptly dropped his mug of tea on to the floor, so they'd –

Hang on, he'd dropped his tea on the floor. Hot tea. 'Better clear that up,' Woody had joked, 'otherwise Nurse Barbara will think I'm squiffy in the head and confine me to the TV

room to watch Channel 4 afternoon movies!'

And they had mopped the tea up with tissues, but commented that it had stained the blue lino.

The vice-marshal mentally visualised the old room, starting with the window. The bed was... oh, about two feet to the left, the chairs another foot, so the spill was...

There.

On the lino, a tea stain.

He hurried to the left-hand wall, where the bed would have been, and started moving some of the files about.

Yes! A light patch of paintwork, with a screw hole at the top and larger hole where the wire had been. The bedroom's emergency alarm in case a resident was ill..

So this had been Woody's room, until last night.

Someone had been very quick and very clever to put all this up in one night, but it was a sham.

On another impulse, he looked for a box file... There it was.

Aba- Ata. He rummaged through. Abberton, W, Addison R., Ashton D., Atkinson A.A.B... no Ashtree, W. or otherwise.

He replaced the file and shivered. As if someone had walked over his grave. So he sought out another box file, this one Dab-Dil. He flicked through it. Dawson, H., Dennis, J., Dickinson, C.

Yes, yes... Yes, admission date right. Yes, date he'd had to go to the GP in town for his leg pain, yes... and - oh.

'6 January 1994. Nurse called at 3.04 a.m. Heart failure.

Hospital confirmed time of death: 3.26 a.m.' He was about to put the file away when he very slowly picked up his sheaf of notes and pocketed them. Then put the box file carefully down. 'Didn't know clairvoyance was part of their training,'

he muttered.

So, he had five days to live before he died of 'heart failure'.

Just as the mysterious Jonnie Sudbury had. And as it seemed that Woody had. The vice-marshal wondered how far from his own body an air-filled hypodermic syringe would be found.

Of course. They'd only just killed Woody when he found him. Must've scarpered and dropped the bloody thing when they heard the vice-marshal coming. That's why he hadn't known those nurses and why they were so keen to analyse the hypo.

Paris. Had to get there as Woody had suggested. If for no other reason than staying here wasn't safe. After all, he would be dead in seven rather short days.

As casually as possible, he walked back downstairs, went to his room and put his jacket and overcoat on, checked his wallet for cash and cards, took his passport from the top drawer of his dresser and gave his room a final look around.

The only other thing he took was a framed photograph of him and Elly, and Justin aged about fifteen.

He'd arrived at Wessex Downs with very little else.

He wandered back out, past the duty nurse and towards the door.

'Excuse me, where are you going?'

He turned to look at the temporary nurse. 'I'm sorry?'

'Well, we can't have you just wandering off now, can we Mr Dickinson.'

He stared at her, adrenalin starting to pump in a way it hadn't for many, many years. 'That's the second time you've called me by my name, nurse. How do you know who I am?'

'It'd be best if you sat down, Mr Dickinson. You're obviously a bit confused. We've known each other for months.' The nurse tried a smile, but it clearly didn't come naturally to her.

She looked more like a skull.

'If you want to stop me, Nurse Whoever You Are, I suggest you call on some of your burlier colleagues to help you. Until then I'm going out of that door, as is my right.

Goodbye to you.'

He turned and left, albeit walking slightly faster than normal. He had walked up the driveway and out on to the street before he heard running feet behind him.

The street was full of people, cars and trucks were going by. His pursuers would be unlikely to stage anything too melodramatic here, surely.

Just in case, he waved down a mini-cab. ‘Railway station, please,’ he told the driver, and off it went. With the vice-marshal safely inside.

Stage two of his life was now over.

Therése Gavalle awoke with a start. She decided that her military training had given her a sixth sense, for danger. And something about this big old house had got her hackles up.

Of course, having to share a wing with the creepy Magnate assassins didn’t help her mood – she’d have to try to convince John Doe, or whoever he was, that working with them wasn’t going to... well, work.

She slipped her clothes on and eased open the bedroom door. So far, so good. Nothing life-threatening there.

Wait. There was a sound – a soft sound. Like humming.

But not anyone singing. It was... artificial in nature.

She crept expertly down the huge staircase, not letting a single step creak under her.

Her revolver nestled comfortably in the small of her back, tucked into her waistband. Within easy reach.

Whoever this Sebastian Malvern was, she didn’t like him.

Her sixth sense told her not to.

Of course, if he was as powerful an ESPnet as he claimed, a phrase like ‘sixth sense’ was a bit of a joke.

Gavalle stopped to listen. The humming was coming from behind the big double doors that led into the dining room.

She withdrew her gun and took off the safety catch, then moved silently to the doors and tested their weight.

One opened easily and silently – enough for her to peek in and look around.

She could see Sebastian Malvern. He was facing away from her, hands clasped behind his back. She opened the door a fraction more to find out what he was looking at.

The humming was louder now and she could see its source.

A tall column of harsh blue light, about a metre wide, ran from the floor to the ceiling. Around it, tiny tendrils of blue electricity arced and crackled – the column itself was the source of the humming.

But what scared Gavalle was that in the light, floating, there was a face.

It was the face of something she hadn't seen in five and a half years, since she had been posted to Reunion.

It was the face of the creature that had killed 50 per cent of her team and blanked out her memory. The face of the alien creature that, according to John Doe, had attacked four of his ESPnets in the same way, providing them artificially with their powers.

And its eyes moved and rested on her.

'Come in, Captain Gavalle,' said Malvern slowly. 'We won't bite.'

She did as bidden, but the revolver was up, moving back and forth, ready to take out whichever gave her cause first.

'What the hell is that?'

Malvern turned, raising his hands to show he was unarmed.

He smiled. 'This, Captain, is our paymaster. I believe you've already met, but to make it a tad more formal, Captain Therèse Gavalle, may I present the Magnate of the Cylox.'

'The what of what?'

'Oh don't be tedious, Captain. You know you work for the. Magnate. Your mysterious John Doe told you in Paris.'

Gavalle swallowed. 'The Magnate is a shadow government. Ruling the world. Manipulating the main governments without them knowing.'

'Well, yes, there is that,' Malvern conceded. 'But the truth is, the Magnate is actually one rather large chap with the ability to reshape our minds, and –'

'Sebastian,' said the Magnate in a booming voice that brought a thrill of sheer terror to Gavalle's mind. Terror she had hoped never to feel again. 'Sebastian, I'm afraid she's not the one. I knew it five years ago, I'm sure of it now.'

‘Oh,’ Malvern shrugged. ‘Oh, what a shame. Please put the gun away, Captain.’

Gavalle couldn’t believe it – she was doing what he said.

Safety catch back on. Gun slipped back inside her waistband.

‘Now, step forward please.’

She did so. She didn’t want to, but she did.

And the humming got louder. It was inside her head.

Hurting. Blotting out everything else.

‘Thank you, Captain Gavalle,’ it said, for the second time in her life. ‘For everything.’

And her world stopped.

Therése Gavalle awoke with a start. She decided that her military training had given her a sixth sense, for danger. And something about this big old house had got her hackles up.

Of course, having to share a wing with the creepy Magnate assassins didn’t help her mood – she’d have to try to convince John Doe, or whoever he was, that working with them wasn’t going to... well, work.

She slipped her clothes on and eased open the bedroom door. So far, so good. Nothing life-threatening there.

Wait. There was a sound – a soft sound. Like humming.

‘Good morning, Captain,’ said Sebastian Malvern, carrying a tray of breakfast towards her. ‘Sorry, was I out of key? I’ve never been very good at keeping a tune. Here’s breakfast.’

‘I... but... what is... ‘

‘Oh, don’t worry, the fair damsels de Meanour and Feasance are cheerfully munching their breakfast in bed right now. But I thought it best if you slept in. The Irish twins will be here in thirty minutes with the American boy, and the Network’s jet will arrive thirty minutes later. All sorted.’

Gavalle stared at her host.

‘Something wrong, Captain?’

‘No.’ Yes. ‘No, everything’s fine. Just... I must have been dreaming.’

‘Anything nice?’ Malvern smiled hospitably, but Gavalle was wrestling with her memories.

But no. Nothing. Gone. Whatever the dream had been, it had vanished as the smell of scrambled eggs and muffins wafted around her.

‘Sorry, Mr Malvern. Strange bed, strange house. I imagine I am just a bit... how do you say it... edgy?’

Malvern laughed. ‘This old place brings that out in everyone, Captain. My father used to say it was haunted.’ He turned to go back down the stairs. ‘But there’s no such things as ghosts, Captain. *Au revoir*.’

Gavalle took the breakfast tray back to her room. Suddenly she felt far more awake and refreshed. She’d eat, grab a shower and collect the American boy. Then a quick flight back to the de Gaulle heliport and a car ride back to Paris and the Network.

Nothing could be simpler.

The American boy Gavalle required was sleeping. Dreaming.

He had to be dreaming.

Four years ago he had come to England on a holiday visit, stayed with some friends of his parents in a tiny little town called, ridiculously enough, Pease Pottage.

He didn’t know anyone. He had no friends there, no pen pals, nothing. Truth be told, he hadn’t wanted to come. But his mom and Alan, the father in the English home, had been work colleagues some years before either were married and had kept in touch. Regular Christmas cards, photos of the babies as the years went by, and at one point, ten years or so back, the Bush family of Pease Pottage had travelled Stateside and called up the Kortess to say hi.

Friendships blossomed again. Now English mom, sorry Mum, met American dad, all four adults got on famously.

Friendships strengthened.

American family had nine-year-old son. English family had fifteen-year-old daughter. Both kids got on OK. Both mothers probably

thought boy had crush on older girl. Girl not stupid. She knew boy had crush on older boy who lived next door. Nine-year-old boy knew that, too. Boy and girl became friends.

Ten years later, nineteen-year-old boy, having consummated quite a few similar 'crushes', arrived in England full of hopes and ambitions, kick-starting stage two of his life.

Twenty-four-year old girl away in London. Ah well. Boy acts all helpful around Bush home, gets on with Alan and Christine Bush, but also meets sixteen-year-old boy in nightclub. Falls head over heels in love.

Holiday romance or something stronger?

Possible confusion when girl, Melanie Jane, arrives home, discovers affair, knows younger kid's older brother, Michael.

But no, Melanie Jane is cool, keeps things secret.

Weeks pass. Young lads getting closer.

Then younger lad vanishes, kidnapped by augmented Irish brother and sister. Augmented with alien technology such as indestructible bodies, guns mounted in right hands, alien energy flowing through veins. That kind of augmentation.

Younger lad now working for them, hopefully against his will. All seems hopeless.

Melanie Jane and alien friend the Doctor destroy evil force. Irish twins vanish.

Younger boy vanishes, too.

Melanie Jane tells older boy younger boy has been murdered.

Only drawback to this is that American boy is a very, very powerful telepath. He knows Melanie Jane is lying. In between odd jobs working for British police etc, using (and abusing?) his ESP skills, American boy searches unsuccessfully for younger boy.

Love will conquer all. One day, they'll be reunited. Hearts, flowers, fireworks in the skies.

The American boy Gavalle required was dreaming. He had to be dreaming. Life never works out that way, no matter how hard you

want it to.

Life's a bitch and then you die, as the saying goes.

For Trey Korte, on the morning of 31 December 1993, life's a bitch, then you wake up to see the boy... sorry, man you love staring at you.

Complete lack of recognition on his face.

You read his mind.

You can't. It's got blocks on it. Alien blocks.

Blocks placed there by Irish twins. Also in room. Can't read them, either.

'Joe?'

Beautiful person, beautiful soul, beautiful grail walks out, completely unaware you exist.

'Joe!'

'I'm sorry,' says Irishman.

No you're not, you low-life piece of alien crap. Sorry? You don't know the meaning of the word. You did this to him.

You've done this to me! What have you done to him? To me?

To us?

'Now I know why I recognised your brain waves,' says the Irish woman. 'From Brighton. We stole Joe from you. Another life we've destroyed. How many more?'

Trey stood up, shakily. 'Why aren't I in hospital?'

The Irishman looks away, won't catch Trey's eye. 'You put yourself into a coma, yes? To avoid the Magnate's call.

Too late. They spotted you and found you.'

The Irishwoman does maintain eye contact. 'You're a powerful ESPnet, one of the most powerful we've ever met.

There's a reason you're here now.'

‘To torment me? To show me Joe? To show me you’ve turned him into a vegetable?’

‘He’s not a vegetable,’ says the man.

‘And no,’ adds the woman. ‘That’s not why you’re here.’

We had no idea until Joe walked in and you woke up and reacted the way you did. You’re here because in half an hour we have to deliver you back to the enemy. A new enemy. The Magnate – and those who serve them. Give us five minutes to explain things. If you don’t want to help us, leave. We’ll accept the consequences and explain that you escaped.’

She smiles. He doesn’t trust her. ‘We’ve hurt you so badly, Trey. We’ve no desire to do it again. For four years, you’ve been searching for Joe, yes? For four years Cellian and I have been searching for redemption. To atone for Joseph, Ashley and Janine. And the deaths on our consciences of... of dozens more.’

And Trey, half his mind distracted by the knowledge that the man he loved – loves – is twenty feet away and he can do nothing about it, listens to what the twins have to say.

Stage two of his life is now over.

Chapter Twelve

I of the Needled

The morning had not got off to a flying start for Mel.

Evelyn had already been up, taken a constitutional walk around the city centre, bought the local newspaper and arrived back at the pub with coffee on a cardboard tray and buns in a brown paper bag. This caused much distress to the girl behind the reception desk, who had tried to point out that the pub could have supplied coffee and tea cakes.

‘Of course you could, dear,’ Evelyn was saying, ‘but not as fresh as these ones, I’m sure. Not to worry.’

Thirty-love.

Evelyn smiled at Mel as the sleepy girl wandered towards her, making big cow eyes as she tried to massage them fully open. ‘Coffee, Mel?’

‘I don’t, thanks all the same.’

‘Oh no, I forgot. Silly me. I’ll pop out and get you some juice. Just wait there.’ Evelyn thrust the coffee and buns into her friend’s hands, earning Mel a look of loathing from the receptionist as if whoever held them was automatically the archenemy.

‘We can do juice, you know,’ she told Evelyn.

Thirty-all.

‘I expect you can, dear, but I doubt it’s –’

Thirty-forty.

‘... fresh,’ finished the receptionist. ‘Actually, it is,’ she added, rather tartly.

Deuce.

Evelyn beamed at her. ‘Splendid. You run along and get Mel some carrot juice then and... oh dear, don’t you do carrot juice?’ The receptionist’s face clearly said they didn’t.

Advantage, Mrs Smythe.

‘Y’see, that’s why I was going to toddle out and buy some.

I just knew.’ And with that, Evelyn vanished again.

Game, set and match.

Mel was trying to smile apologetically at the receptionist, but the girl simply turned on her heel, nose in the air and disappeared into the depths of the pub’s forbidden interior, no doubt to spit in any milk or sugar they might require.

‘Hello, Mel,’ said the Doctor from behind her, sounding enormously bright and cheerful. She turned and nearly died of shock. He was wearing pyjamas. Loose silvery silk ones covered in various breeds of cats, all of them wearing his hideous coat. ‘For me? Oh, you are kind’

Mel couldn’t stop him as he eased the tray of coffee and bag of buns away from her. ‘See you later,’ he chortled.

Mel was still standing there, hands aloft but free of produce, when Evelyn returned with an enormous cardboard mug of carrot juice. She

shot Mel a venomous glare as she took in the lack of coffee and buns, and put the juice on the reception desk. She then hoisted up her skirt and trudged up the stairs, growling ‘Doctor’ in a voice more dangerous than any Dalek or Stalagtron. Mel grabbed the juice and followed her.

They entered the Doctor’s room simultaneously.

‘Good morning,’ he beamed at them. A few crumbs on the bedspread implied that this was all which remained of the buns, and he was polishing off the first coffee.

Evelyn snatched the second and third coffees away from him, placing one on the dresser and drinking the other herself.

‘I wanted a bun, too.’

‘Why didn’t you get Mel to buy you one then? She kindly got me some, you only had to ask.’

‘Well, actually... ‘ Mel started to say, but the Doctor held his hand up.

‘I know, Mel, you were only looking after dear Evelyn. At her age, she has to watch her figure.’ He patted his not entirely svelte tummy. ‘A figure like this is the result of years of a carefully managed well-balanced diet of denial and indulgence.’

‘More like the result of years of a carefully managed combination of thermo- and aerodynamics, if you ask me,’

countered Evelyn.

The Doctor ignored her, and smiled at Mel. ‘You see, if we don’t look after her dietary needs, I fear Evelyn would easily balloon like a walrus if she’s not careful.’

‘Are you saying I resemble a walrus now?’ Evelyn was going purple.

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ protested the Doctor.

Mel could see where this was going and went to drink her carrot juice.

Saw the coffee.

Carrot juice.

Coffee.

Carrot ju-

Oh, what the heck. She took the lid off the coffee and reacquainted herself with the evils of caffeine. It was going to be a long day...

‘Before I go, I want a favour in return.’

Trey Korte crossed his arms, giving off a clear signal that the request was actually an instruction. Ciara and Cellian weren’t daft enough to imagine they could refuse.

‘It’ll do no good,’ Cellian warned, ‘but you’ll find him out in the garden. He’s very good with the few plants we grow just by the cave mouth. The soil there is actually very good for carrots, parsnips and –’

The look Trey gave him suggested that the American didn’t give a damn about root vegetables. Ciara took him to the door of their room and pointed Joe out to Trey. ‘Just remember, no telepathy or it’ll be picked up like a beacon. I’m sorry.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ snapped Trey. ‘Sure you are.’

He walked down the wooden steps from the upper floor to the ground and towards Joe. His heart was pounding.

Four years he’d waited for this.

Four years he’d imagined they’d fall into each other’s arms, overjoyed at their long-awaited reunion.

Instead, Joe just glanced up and gave him a curious sideways look, implying there was as much recognition as if Trey were merely a postman or milkman he might see every day or two.

‘Hello,’ Joe said politely.

‘Hi Joe,’ said Trey, trying to keep his voice level.

Deadpan.

‘We saw you arrive last night.’ Joe stopped digging and rested on his spade. Trey could see he was no longer the skinny shrimp of a few years ago – Joe was a mature young man, with a body used to working the soil. Normally he’d be impressed, attracted even. But this time it was just further proof that this wasn’t the same... person of all those trips to the Brighton Pavilion, or walks along the promenade towards Hove or visits to SeaWorld or –

‘Are you staying long?’ Joe asked.

‘No,’ Trey said. ‘I just wanted to say hi.’

Joe looked at Trey – was there recognition there? The temptation Trey felt to scan Joe’s mind, to use his power, was very great indeed, but he knew the risks. Knew his ‘duty’.

‘Sorry. Have we met?’ Joe asked the question in the most casual and honest way, but to Trey it was like a thousand hot knives in his heart. He closed his eyes and swallowed.

‘Yeah. Once. A long time ago.’

Joe’s eyes flashed with a sudden eagerness. ‘Do you know who I am? Anything about my past?’

Trey just stared at him. Flashbacks to four years ago, laughter, annoyance, pleasure, warmth, closeness, breath on a cheek...

‘No, sorry,’ he said as quickly as he could. ‘We only met for a brief moment in Brighton once. Barely spoke.’

‘Oh,’ Joe bit his bottom lip. ‘Oh well. I suppose one day I’ll go back, maybe that’ll help jog my memory.’ He smiled.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Trey. Trey Korte.’

Joe offered a muddy hand. ‘Hi Trey. Good to meet you.’

Again or whatever. Sorry... I don’t remember things, you know?’

‘Yeah. No problem. I’ll see you round, kid,’ Trey said gritting his teeth.

He mustn’t use his telepathy. Mustn’t try and lift the blocks. The twins had told him they were immovable and, having encountered the original source of their power, Trey didn’t doubt that to be true. He’d only make things worse.

He turned his back on Joe, to see the twins standing by their 1950s American ambulance.

He hoped they couldn’t see the tears in his eyes.

‘I’m going to the small serene village of Halcham,’ announced the

Doctor, as the three friends stood in somewhat damp and cold air by Sheffield British Rail station.

‘You mean, you’re going to confront the Irish twins,’ said Mel. ‘Why?’

‘Because, Melanie, someone has to. The reason poor Evelyn here had to do all that work for me was to locate them.

Now that Trey has been kidnapped by this “Magnate”, whatever that is, I’m forced to consider that there may be a connection.’

Evelyn frowned at him over her glasses. ‘That’s a bit of a jump isn’t it?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Possibly, yes, but call it a gut instinct, if you like. Time Lord intuition. That’s why I need you two to get into the university and use their computers to create an –’

‘Automatic data search and retrieve engine, coded to sift and prioritise all and any references throughout the world on this word “Magnate” when relating to organisations, crime, police or research and development of extrasensory perception,’ finished Mel. ‘Just like you told me last night.’

The Doctor put his arm around her. ‘Who needs a computer when you have a Melanie Jane Bush?’

‘The sad thing is, Evelyn,’ said Mel, ‘he thinks that was a compliment.’

Evelyn shivered in her overcoat. ‘Well, the uni is a few minutes walk that way. Shall we go, Mel?’

Mel nodded. ‘Doctor, where shall we meet?’

‘Back here, in the bar, say about seven o’clock?’

Mel frowned. ‘How far away is Halcham? I thought you’d be gone until tomorrow.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Oh no, it’s only about thirty miles, straight through the Peaks along the A57 and then down along the A-’

‘Hang on a mo,’ Evelyn interrupted. ‘I thought you were taking the train?’

The silence was deafening.

‘Oh,’ the Doctor finally said. ‘Didn’t I mention I... er, wanted to, um, borrow your delightful little car?’

‘That would be the car that was, I believe “a pile of junk”
that no one would steal?’

The Doctor coughed. ‘Yes, well, didn’t actually say... I mean... ‘

‘Would that be the car whose wings and wheels were quite likely to fall off at any moment?’

‘Ah... well, Evelyn... I mean, that was a joke and... well... ‘

The Doctor beamed at Evelyn in a way that Mel knew meant he’d get his way. She hated that look. ‘Please?’

‘No,’ Evelyn said simply.

Mel was as surprised as the Doctor. Finally there was someone that look couldn’t get through to.

‘Not on your nelly, Doctor. My car, my pile’ of old junk, my reward for being stuck in 1993. Enjoy the train. I think you can go to Glossop from here. Then get a cab.’

The Doctor looked astonished. ‘Please Evelyn, please?

The keys... I can’t bear trains, all that noise and steam and –’

‘You told me once you wanted to be a train driver,’

offered Mel.

‘It’s the 1990s, Doctor. Steam went out at around the same time as your schoolboy charm. It might work on youngsters like Mel here, but this old bird has seen too much, been around too long.’ Evelyn took the cat key ring with the car and house keys from her coat pocket, and dropped it dramatically into her handbag, clicking the clasp shut with exaggerated finality

‘Hal’

‘How childish,’ smarted the Doctor.

‘I had a good teacher,’ was Evelyn’s response as she turned away. ‘Come on Mel. The Doctor has a train to catch.’

See you at seven,' she called back, almost dragging Mel away.

As Mel watched the Doctor tramp sadly towards the station, she pulled away from Evelyn. 'That was rather mean, you know.'

Evelyn sighed. 'I know, dear. But he really does bring out the worst in me sometimes. If he'd just asked instead of assuming...' She looked at Mel, who was pursing her lips.

'Oh, all right.' She undid her handbag and took out the key ring. 'Go on, run after him and give him these. He'll probably have to run for the train and that's not a sight I'd want to inflict on anyone in Sheffield. Place is depressing enough in this weather.'

Mel took the keys with a grin. 'You're fab, Evelyn, you know tha -'

But Evelyn was looking beyond Mel, back towards the pub where they had stayed. Mel followed her line of sight.

Chugging out of the car park was Evelyn's Riley, the Doctor waving at them oh-so-cheerfully. Seconds later, amidst a grating of misused gears and slipping clutch, it roared away towards the A57, and the countryside.

Mel felt the key ring being taken from her hand. Evelyn was holding the keys up to the sky. 'How? How did he do...

these aren't my car keys! These are the keys to a ruddy Volkswagen Beetle! Look!'

Sure enough, dangling from Evelyn's cat key ring were two very distinctive keys with the VW emblem carved into them.

The temple on Ghonn was a hive of activity as monks scurried about, preparing the shrines indented into the walls. Busts and statues of men and women of varying degrees of chubbiness were decorated with garlands of flowers or precious stones were dotted at their bases.

Damien Braun and Shelly Kurtzmann had been untied by Loretta van Cheaden, or Ini-Ma, or Totally Freaky Loony Girl as Damien had quietly referred to her, and asked to set up their equipment in the centre of the temple.

The camera was pointed at an ornate black throne situated in one corner. A dragon motif was etched on its back – similar to the one on the albino's cane.

‘OK, Shell,’ said Damien as he wiped the camera’s lens,

‘what strikes you as odd about this place?’

Shell just frowned. ‘Well, dur! Everything?’

‘No, come on, put that reporter’s brain in gear. If we’re here we might as well keep working, for ourselves if not old Whitey, wherever he may be.’ Damien stopped and leant on the camera. ‘Look around. It strikes me as odd.’

‘What does?’

‘Just look will you?’

Shelly blew air out of her cheeks. Her chipmunk impression, as Damien would say.

‘Give me a clue,’ she said after a minute. ‘Just one.’

‘The statues,’ Damien replied.

Shelly wandered over to an alcove. Slowly she came back to her co-worker. ‘OK, Daym, I’m seeing it now. That one’s Mayan. I remember it from that time we went down into South America.’

Damien nodded. ‘And that over there is a Buddha. And the one in that alcove is, I think, actually an African fertility symbol – not exceptionally god-like.’

‘And they’re fakes – that Mayan one is just a plaster cast.’

‘And that,’ said Damien, pointing to the furthest one, a dark, full length figure in pewter, ‘is Kahless the Klingon.’

‘The who and what?’

‘I watch a lot of *Star Trek*, right. That is a Klingon.’

Shell didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the stupidity of it. ‘But these guys are... worshipping them.’

Damien shook his head. ‘No, these guys are in a trance and doing what they’ve been told. Going through the motions.

Look at them, Shell. They don’t know whether they’re coming or going.’

‘You see, too, Daym, that most of them aren’t locals.’

Damien agreed, pointing out that, as most of the locals were fishermen anyway, ‘they wouldn’t know Buddha from Kali if one of ‘em turned up in a net.’

Shelly walked up to one of the women who was placing leaves and twigs below a statue and saw that it was clearly a bust of Christ, complete with crown of thorns. ‘This is madness,’ she said to Damien. ‘Why don’t they realise?’

‘Look, Shell, look at them. You’re right, they’re not from Ghonn. Our “Ini-Ma” friend, she had a pure LA accent. I reckon more of these guys are from the States than from this piss-poor little island. This is a scam of some sort.’ Damien tapped his camera. ‘OK, Shell, we’re focused on the big chair, yeah? What for?’

Shelly shrugged. ‘To show the world that our albino guide has a seat of power and is surrounded by disciples?’

‘Yup. And all this, the temple, everything in it, it’s set dressing. But no one’s going to know that, no one’s going to notice that he’s been down the local tourist shop and bought up a load of cheap knock-off icons.’

‘And your Klingon,’ Shelly added wryly.

‘Yeah, OK, so he’s got a credit account at FAO Schwartz too. What I’m getting at is that this is a con, and these poor guys are taken in by it.’

‘Yeah. And,’ Shelly said very seriously, ‘let’s not forget, so are we.’

Had Mel and Evelyn headed to Sheffield a couple of years earlier, the university they found would have looked very different.

Indeed, for a start it was then Sheffield Polytechnic, but in the early 1990s it was the recipient of a fair-sized grant from the government to redevelop itself into what was now.

Sheffield Hallam University. The old Sixties glass and concrete buildings were gutted internally and refashioned in a modern style as a series of lecture halls, meeting rooms and private studies, some of which were still under construction.

The central library of the uni, however, was situated in an untouched part of the complex a few hundred yards from the main halls, next to the bus station. This was originally called the Phoenix Building but

was now known as the Nelson Mandela Building. Also built in, the Sixties, it was a more traditional brick structure and housed the junior common room as well as the library.

Mel was surprised at how easy it had been to break into the Mandela Building. She had used a simple picklock, which was just one of the many instruments on her Swiss Army knife. Her experiences during her travels in the TARDIS had taught her to always keep it in her purse.

She was, however, even more surprised at the ease with which Evelyn, once they were inside, disabled the alarm system before it had even registered their presence. 'When you've organised as many midnight parties and postlecture soirees as I have, my dear,' she said quietly, 'you learn how to do things like that so as not to upset the dean and his cronies.'

'Your students must've worshipped you,' Mel hissed.

'Of course they did. That's why the dean was so keen to be rid of me. I was due for "retirement" had the Doctor not come along when he did. One day I'm going to find some dirt on the dean that'll make him change his mind.' Evelyn smiled conspiratorially. 'I'll enjoy that.'

Mel thought about this a second. 'When did he become your dean exactly?'

Evelyn looked furtive. 'Can't remember. Few years before I was whisked away to lands of adventure and thrills, I suppose.'

'Oh really. So in 1993, where exactly was he working?'

Evelyn shrugged. 'The library's just up here, by the look of things.' She turned to look back at Mel. 'I'm sorry my dear, did you say something?'

Mel shook her head and sighed. That was why Evelyn had been so keen to come to Sheffield rather than York yesterday.

'And what, may I ask, Dr Smythe, will you be doing whilst I reprogram these computers?'

Evelyn looked all innocence and light. 'Oh. Just reading in there.' She indicated a small room to the right of the library itself. It said RECORD ROOM – PRIVATE. 'Seems to be a...

ummm... place they might keep records. I'll be just, ah, going through some papers. And records.' She suddenly beamed at Mel. 'Nothing you should concern yourself with. By the way, how are you at encryption?'

'Why?'

'Well, could you send an e-mail to an address that doesn't exist yet, avoid it being bounced back or lost and ensure it sits on an existing server until that e-mail account is activated?'

'It's illegal.'

'Could you do that?'

'It's immoral, Evelyn!'

'Could you do that?'

'I'll think about it. I'm not sure it's possible.'

They wandered into the library and Mel booted up the server and turned on two or three monitors. She spent a few minutes recabling them, then configuring their choosers so that they were on a local network rather than a general university one. That way, no one could find out what they were doing or hack into them.

She activated the modem, an old 14k. Although it was advanced for the Mel from Pease Pottage in 1989, now that she had witnessed many types of futuristic megabyte modems around the galaxy she found it quite primitive.

And said so. Colourfully.

A slightly shocked Evelyn looked across at her. 'My iBook at home has a 128 modem. But then, that's year 2000

home, not now home. And we're in Sheffield not Great Rokeby.'

Mel gave her a withering look.

'I'll keep quiet, I think,' Evelyn said. She nipped out of the library and went towards the records room. On impulse, Mel opened her handbag – sure enough, the Swiss Army knife had been half-inched!

Silently she followed Evelyn and found her already ensconced in the now unlocked room, rummaging. Mel held out her hand, giving Evelyn the sort of look Christine Bush had used when Mel was ten and

had stolen the chocolate cake tin.

Evelyn gave Mel exactly the look that the younger woman used to give her mother when handing over said cake tin. The Swiss Army knife was thus returned to Mel's outstretched hand.

Moments later, back in the library, Mel had the modem and British Telecom wall socket stripped and, with the Swiss Army knife, was making a few adjustments that would surprise some students next term. 'Got it to 56,' she muttered finally and reconnected the BT line.

She activated the modem, logged on to the rather limited search engines and left them searching while she turned her attention to the server and began reprogramming it. This was to increase the speed and memory to the other three PCs so that the server would work as a smart database, filtering out everything she didn't want and intelligently creating submenus and storage bases for the relevant information automatically.

'I bet even the Doctor couldn't have done that,' Evelyn said coming up behind her, a few papers shoved indiscreetly inside her cardigan.

'Oh I don't know,' replied Mel, secretly agreeing but feeling a bit of loyalty towards her other friend. 'He'd have figured it out in time.'

'Not before blowing up half of South Yorkshire in the process, I'll bet.'

'Why must you criticise him so much?' asked Mel fiercely. 'I mean, if he was that bad, why did you keep travelling with him?'

Evelyn seemed physically stung by Mel's ferocity. 'I don't criticise him that much,' she said quietly. 'Just enough to keep him on his toes. He enjoys it.'

'He doesn't,' said Mel. 'You know, sometimes I think you really hurt him.'

'Well, he hurt me, remember. Dumping me here.'

'Oh, but think,' pleaded Mel. 'Look at all the wonderful things you've had the chance to see and do.'

'Oh, I don't knock that, Mel, not for one minute. And I appreciate everything I've seen. But he can be a bit of an egotist and he needed me to deflate him every so often. It's harmless joshing.'

Mel was suddenly feeling very soapboxish. ‘What we’ve had the chance to do is fantastic. Think of all these poor people on Earth who can’t even dream about the places we’ve been to, the people we’ve met.’

‘People we’ve seen die, cultures and races we’ve seen wiped out. Oh yes, let’s not overlook the bad bits.’ Evelyn waved a finger at Mel as if the girl was one of her pupils.

A bad move. Mel suddenly stamped her foot. ‘How ungrateful are you?’

Evelyn was quick to shout back. ‘And how spoiled are you? Maybe you’ve only seen the nice bits, maybe you’ve only been privy to the pretty green worlds and lovely bright constellations. Or maybe, just maybe, you’ve not opened your eyes enough to what’s out there, Mel. The whole universe is actually just as good or just as bad as Earth, but on a larger, more exotic scale. I’ve learnt to think proportionally about this. Have you?’

‘I don’t know All I know is that I refuse to be cynical and belligerent about the universe. I haven’t seen it all you see, so I don’t think I’m capable of judging “the whole universe” by my limited standards just yet, thank you!’

Mel sat down and turned away from Evelyn, concentrating on her database.

‘Well,’ said Evelyn, trying to lighten the mood after about a minute had passed, ‘at least you went to the Eye of Orion!’

But Mel wasn’t to be placated yet and snapped back: ‘You went to Gallifrey!’

Evelyn came back too quickly. She shouldn’t have – this wasn’t the kind of argument she wanted to have. ‘Well, you got to sign his cheques. Never let me do that!’ Oh, how childish was that Evelyn Smythe?

‘You got-to have him fall in love with you!’ yelled Mel.

Evelyn stopped. ‘I what?’

Mel wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

Now! ‘Nothing. Sorry.’

‘No... explain.’

Mel sighed. ‘I think... I think he’s in love with you.’

Evelyn snorted in that derisive way of hers. ‘Nonsense, the only person he’s in love with is the one that stares back from a mirror.’

But Mel pressed on. ‘No! That’s why he was so hurt that you stopped travelling with him. That’s why you got left here

– he’s just a small-minded petty man after all. In other words, he’s human.’

Evelyn sat down in one of the chairs, indicating to Mel to take one opposite her. She smiled, a little sadly Mel thought.

‘Except that he isn’t, Mel. That’s the point. Look at me – I look older than him but I’m nine hundred or so years younger.

He’ll still look that way when I’m in my grave. He’s not in love with me – how could he be? As you so rightly said, I’ve been to Gallifrey and may you be blessed with never doing the same. It’s an awful place, soulless. Full of the living dead, working, observing the universe but, with a couple of exceptions, they don’t really know what life is. We look at the Doctor and we judge him by where he’s come from – we see that he’s out in the universe, exploring, thumbing his nose at his peers and immediately we exaggerate him.

‘We see him as a roguish charmer, a hero, someone who defies his Time Lord nature. So we overcompensate, see him as romantic, dashing, passionate, a direct opposite to the rest of his people. But he’s not. Not really. He’s just a slight sideways step from them, not the chasm-leaper we want him to be. He is still an alien, Mel. His emotions, his feelings...

they’re alien, too. He’s too big, too complex a person to be weighed down with human characteristics. The moment we drag the Doctor down to our level he ceases to be who he really is and we blind ourselves to that, we want more. He’s not in love with me, any more than he’s in love with you, because deep, deep down he’s simply not biologically capable of it.’

Mel took Evelyn’s hand. ‘I’m so sorry, I never realised.

It’s you who is in love. With him.’

Evelyn sighed. ‘Oh, dear girl, you’re so young, so naive.

There’s only one man in my life – Lawrence Smythe. No matter that we’re divorced, no matter that we said and did terrible things, we were together for twenty-five years. That’s long enough to stay in love for ever. And certainly long enough not to be so damn fool as to fall for someone else. I admire the Doctor, I like him enormously. He’s a true, dear friend and I’d do anything for him. But neither of us are “in love” with each other. But bless your heart for wanting us to be, and for still being young enough to believe it is possible.

Love is beyond attraction, beyond – God be praised – the physical. Love is about the soul, about just knowing that the person you are with is... is part of you. For ever. That without them, no matter how strong you are, how resolute, how logical and rational without them, something in life seems a little off-kilter.

‘That is why I was happy to go with the Doctor so easily.

My divorce had come through days before – I needed an escape, to avoid the reality that Lawrence and I were finished.

But I still love Lawrence – I still feel off-kilter without him.

But now I can cope, now the pain has diminished. That was why I decided to come home, that was why I asked the Doctor to bring me back. I had healed. I was ready to carry on with my life – he had made me strong again. A wonderful gift I can never thank him for. Except the silly sausage brought me to 1988 and I’m more off-kilter than ever before. Because, instead of going to work, dealing with Lawrence and all the scenarios I’d played over in my mind a thousand times before, I was twelve years off course. Unable to even consider going back to being who I was in the year 2000. Instead had to be a fictional Eve Richmond who in, well... now 1993, doesn’t really exist. Oh, and Mel?’

‘Yes’

‘I think your database has finished its search and come up with an answer. Look.’

John Doe stood outside his office looking down on the glass floors of the complex below.

Of particular interest was the enclosed central area where the ESPnets lay, their minds wired up to the ether, trained to scan all frequencies,

all astral planes, anything to find the reclusive Lai-Ma, the Magnate traitor who had deserted his fellow ‘shadows’.

He looked forward to this exercise coming to an end for two reasons. Firstly, he had been promised that once Lai-Ma was found, or terminated, he would finally be allowed to see the mysterious council he served so loyally. And secondly, it meant he would be free to turn his attention one hundred per cent to tracking down the Doctor and his UNIT cronies and getting revenge for all those missing years. And maybe then he’d get some answers and fill in the blanks.

The telephone rang in his office.

Only three people had the number. Ms de Meanour, Captain Gavallo and his contact on the Magnate council. It would probably be Magnate Five – the only member of the council Doe ever spoke to directly.

He hurried over and picked up the receiver. There was the customary Magnate scrambling sound, and then a voice.

‘Mr Doe, good morning to you.’

‘Good morning to you, sir.’

‘Any news?’

‘None ‘yet sir, although three of my best agents are in Britain now, escorting a replacement ESPnet to complete our set. He’s powerful, a level 12 by all reports.’

‘Excellent, Mr Doe. We’ll be in touch soon. Oh, there is one other thing.’

‘Sir?’

‘I have reports coming in that someone in the Sheffield area is using a fast-response database to access all they can on the Magnate and our activities. Have your delightful ladies terminate any such connections, would you?’

‘Of course sir. *Au revoir*.’

Doe replaced the phone and, for the briefest of seconds, stood staring unblinking into... well, nothing really.

Had John Doe been in full control of his mind, by now a number of things would have occurred to him as being unusual.

Firstly, he might have noticed that for the entire duration of the call all he had actually heard in his ear was a dialling tone. Indeed, the phone had never rung at all.

Secondly, he might have questioned why ‘Number Five’

was the only Magnate member he ever heard from.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, he might have had cause to wonder why, bearing in mind his brain’s refusal to learn French – and the fact that sometimes he could only remember names by referring to notes he had previously written while at other times he remembered such things clearly

– his brain seemed to be so... flexible in what it could and couldn’t retain.

But, as with the fading dreams, the blocks artificially added to Doe’s already confused mind some years previously prevented any such thoughts ever occurring to him.

Instead, as he picked the receiver up again and dialled a mobile number, questions like how he knew the number, just like that, never caused a moment’s flutter.

Chapter Thirteen

A Time to Fear

Captain Therése Gavallo watched as the ambulance pulled up outside Sebastian Malvern’s home.

Ms de Meanour and Ms Feasance immediately strode forward and opened the rear door of the Cadillac, tugging on the stretcher that contained the still-comatose body of the young American ESPnet.

‘He hasn’t woken yet?’ asked Gavallo, as the Irish twins got out of the front of the vehicle.

Malvern stepped down from his front door, easing his way past the captain and stood before the dark-haired couple. ‘Still unconscious?’

Cellian nodded. ‘He hasn’t said a word, sir.’

‘He had a disturbed night, but never actually regained consciousness. We watched him constantly.’ Ciara glanced over at the two tall women who were now carrying her former charge towards a sleek

black stealth jet waiting in a nearby field. A pilot was standing by the cockpit, and he hurried to the side of the aircraft and opened a sliding door to admit the patient.

‘Well, Captain. You’ve got your job done. Time to go?’

‘You seem anxious to be rid of us, Mr Malvern.’ Gavalles looked at him, trying to read his face. ‘Any reason?’

‘Yes, Captain. I dislike you intensely and I find your associates rude and aggressive. This is my home. Happy as I am to be working for the Magnate, I’m not obliged to like all their other...’ he waved his hand dismissively, ‘gophers.

Please have a safe flight back to de Gaulle.’

Gavalles’s mobile rang and she opened her briefcase and took it out, pulling up the aerial. ‘*Oui?*’

She listened briefly and then indicated to Ms de Meanour to come back. Not exactly hurrying, the stronger woman wandered towards her and silently took the phone. She listened intently, then passed it back to Gavalles. The captain nodded once more then disconnected, dropping the phone back inside her case.

‘I am to take the boy to France,’ she reported. ‘Monsieur Doe’s orders. My... associates have a new mission. They may require your hospitality a little longer.’ She smiled evilly at Malvern. ‘I do hope you enjoy playing host to “rude and aggressive” fellow employees of the Magnate. Good day to you, Malvern. I sincerely hope we never meet again.’

Malvern bowed slightly. ‘Reciprocated entirely, madame.

Au revoir.’

Gavalles marched towards the aircraft and joined Ms de Meanour, who appeared to be outlining their new mission to her partner.

Without taking his eyes off the jet, Malvern hissed at the Irish twins. ‘Well?’

‘It’s the boy from Brighton, sir. He’s a level 12, very powerful. Responsible for our... freedom. There is another possible problem.’

‘Go on.’

Cellian took up the tale. 'He's homosexual.'

'I would have thought that meant he was an ideal candidate for the Network, then. No ties.'

'He has... he's had... a relationship. With Joseph.'

Malvern swore and faced the twins. 'I take it then that his

"disturbed night" involved discovering Joe's presence?'

Ciara swallowed. 'I don't think he would be on that plane if we'd disallowed a reunion.'

'Joe presumably didn't remember him.'

'Apparently not,' said Cellian. 'Nevertheless, Korte accepts what we... told him.'

Malvern smiled and looked in the direction of Gavalle.

She was boarding the stealth jet as it prepared for its silent, vertical take-off. 'I really don't think, Captain Gavalle, that you have a very long and distinguished future in the Network.'

'What should we do, sir?' Cellian was already getting back into the driving seat.

'Go back to Halcham and carry on with your New Year preparations. I'll see you in the pub.'

'There is one other thing,' Ciara said.

Malvern sighed. 'I wish I could read you, my dear. It'd make this one-at-a-time confession so much easier.'

'The Doctor is here.'

'On Earth?'

'In Derbyshire. Both Korte and I have a subconscious awareness of his presence. I think he'll seek my brother and me out. He'll be searching for... retribution for our past misdeeds.'

'Then it's up to you to show you've changed. If he turns up, please point him in my direction. He's what... a level 7?'

‘Six sir, really. Moderate ESP powers, but his lack of training means he doesn’t exploit them as well as he might.’

‘A shame. Such potential.’ Malvern glanced over to the field – the two assassins were almost back with him. ‘Leave, Ciara. I will deal with my “guests”. We’ll talk soon.’

Ciara nodded and joined her brother. He reversed the ambulance back down the drive towards the road.

‘Ladies,’ beamed Malvern. ‘A pot of tea, or do you have to dash off?’

‘The Network requires the loan of a vehicle, Mr Malvern,’

said Ms Feasance quietly.

‘Oh, does it indeed?’ Malvern dug into his pocket. ‘Here, take the four-by-four Toyota. Garage Three.’

Ms de Meanour thanked him and took the keys. ‘We will return to London afterwards and leave your car at Waterloo.’

The Network will, of course, reimburse you for any... parking costs.’

‘Oh, how generous. I will arrange for it to be collected tomorrow lunchtime. Leave it in the National Theatre car park, if you will.’

Ms Feasance nodded acquiescence and the two women headed for the garages.

‘Marvellous.’ Malvern glanced toward the study window, as if someone were watching from inside. ‘Life would’ve been far easier if you’d put me in charge of Paris instead of that fop, y’know,’ he called.

His reply was a slight flickering of blue light from within.

The dull morning had become an unusually bright midday by the time the Doctor turned off the A57, and onto the A6013, a winding road that would join up with the Halcham route in a couple of miles. It hadn’t taken half as long to drive there as he had anticipated (and Evelyn’s car could certainly do far more than the 50 m.p.h. she insisted on, one just had to exert the correct pressure on the accelerator pedal) and he was humming along to a cassette of *The Supremes – Twenty Golden Greats* he had found in her glove compartment.

A perfect day for a drive, and with the perfect musical

accompaniment. Marvellous.

He pulled up as he topped a hill, Noe Knoll, and withdrew a set of binoculars from deep within his coat pocket. A gift from a famous ornithologist who had lived in Jamaica during the 1950s, and who the Doctor had taken on a spin in the TARDIS to the 1800s to see a real live dodo. In gratitude, the ornithologist had presented the Doctor with these magnificent binoculars. Shortly afterwards, the Doctor had introduced his bird-watching chum to another Brit who had just moved to the West Indies, a former military man who was intending to use his wartime undercover operations as the basis of a series of fictions. The Doctor had watched as they formed a friendship and had then slipped away, leaving a note requesting that a first edition of any books the writer might publish be left for him care of Coutts bank. The Doctor had indeed accrued a fine library of personally dedicated first editions now, although he'd never quite managed to learn the complicated rules of *chemin de fer*, no matter how many times he'd read the books.

Looking through the binoculars, the Doctor could see a small village built around the Z-shaped road, with smaller dwellings on the hillside. To the far right was a cave mouth, with a tiny two-storey structure to the side of it. The road just petered out as it went through the village and became a pedestrian track that carried on up over the back of the cave mouth. From there it probably joined up with one of the many walks that formed the main Pennine Way. A trek the Doctor had once made in one of his earlier, slightly more adept-at-walking-long-distances bodies. Romana had complained all the way, of course, but that had more to do with the fact that she was carrying K9 – the Doctor had said it wasn't good terrain for the little chap, but she did insist he came too...

Happy days.

He was about to get back into the car when something caught his attention. An aeroplane was taking off from a field close to a large manor house, and about two hundred yards down the hill from where he was parked. Jet planes rarely took off from the middle of fields at the best of times, but this was a VTOL stealth plane from the look of it, completely radarproof, with nonreflective surfaces and capable of Mach 2 speeds.

'Not something you'd see in *The Observer Book of Aircraft*, Doctor, is it?' He watched as it soared straight up until it was a black dot then banked right and shot southwards, soundless despite its speed. The

dampeners to hide the sonic boom it should have produced must have been phenomenal.

He looked at the gates of the manor house through his binoculars. Malvern Hall. ‘Why do I suddenly get the feeling, Doctor, that some time before today is out you’re going to be walking through those gates, hrnmm?’

He replaced the binoculars in his pocket and restarted the car’s engine. He was about to pull away when he heard something.

Odd.

It might have been just a quirk of the engine noise, but for a brief second he was sure he had heard someone call his name.

Just as he’d heard in Sheffield the evening before.

He glanced around, but apart from half a dozen sheep cheerfully munching the damp grass, there was no one.

Nothing.

He revved the engine and continued his drive to Halcham.

The vast, four-tiered library at the university was, Evelyn decided, far better than she had expected. It was an ornate, circular room, with the bookcases situated off the ground on a series of wooden walkways. These were supported every few feet by massive arched oak pillars which bore the weight of the four tiers of bookcases, giving the room a cathedral-like feel. The ceiling was a solid bronze dome, about forty feet up, so the circumference of the fourth tier was less than that of the first one.

Below the first tier, at floor level, was the main desk area where books could be checked in and out, and Mel had set up her interactive database in the centre of this. Next to the pillars, mobile ladders, with handrails for safety, led up to the first tier. This had a set of similar ladders that led to the next tier, and so on.

Presumably a good deal of the grant money the uni had received had been wisely spent on some of the thousands of books, manuscripts and documents in the library, frankly the very best research tools available. The fact that Evelyn had found one of her own early papers on religious persecution in the sixteenth century and one of her (ex-) husband’s on genomes was particularly pleasing.

Sitting on a ladder perched on the walkway of the second tier of the library while Mel busied herself on the ground floor, she was refamiliarising herself with a charming thesis on James Joyce by a young Oxford don she had once met, when she was interrupted by Mel's loud curse.

'Three hours,' Mel said. 'Three hours I've been trying to pin this computer system down...' 'she continued (with a couple of colourful expletives added which Evelyn was surprised Mel knew).

'No luck?'

'Nothing concrete. Every time I get some reference to the Magnate, some clever little series of submenus turns up, and by me time I've worked back, the original has vanished but I'm back at the start of the submenus.'

'A Mobius codex,' Evelyn muttered. 'A student of mine created one of those accidentally. He was trying to create a family tree for James the First, going backwards and forwards to prove his theory that familial inbreeding would, contrary to scientific evidence, eventually create an offspring who genuinely would contain nothing but the best of up to forty ancestors. It failed and he eventually found that whatever branch of the family tree he tried to get back to, his menus kept going around in circles.' Evelyn closed the thesis she was reading. 'I had to fail him. Old Bowman in IT wanted to give him a research grant into Mobius loops, however, so it worked out for the best. You've predated his serendipitous work by nearly ten years. Please keep it to yourself, or the Doctor's precious web of time will come unravelling around our ears.'

Mel was in no mood for Evelyn's joculariry. 'This is serious. I can't go back to the Doctor empty-handed.'

'Why ever not?'

'Well... because he's relying on us, on me, to find out something about the Magnate.'

Evelyn sighed. 'Oh Mel, he's not expecting you to perform the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Besides, I rather think you have discovered something.'

'What?'

'That the Magnate are powerful enough to ensure that anyone using

ideas and technology slightly advanced even for 1993 get locked out, as it were.’ She stopped and Mel frowned, wondering why the lecture was over. ‘Talking of locked out, Mel, when we broke in, did we relock the main entrance to the street behind us?’

‘Yes,’ said Mel. ‘Why?’

Evelyn pointed over her head and Mel turned.

Standing in the only exit from the library were two very tall, very muscular women. Both had closely cropped heads, one with a long dark pigtail down one side, the other with a fuzz of blonde hair. Both were dressed similarly, and had female gender tattoos on their shoulders.

Both exuded danger.

Both demonstrated this by slamming the huge oak doors shut and trapping Mel and Evelyn inside the confined space.

The blonde moved to the left, the pigtail to the right – and Mel realised that the blonde was going for her.

No, she was going for the computer network server.

‘What are you doing!’ Mel squawked.

‘I say,’ called Evelyn, trying to get off her ladder perch,

‘that’s expensive university property. A few undergraduates’ fees are tied up in that.’

The blonde clearly didn’t give a monkey’s: her gloved fist connected with the top of the server with the force of a pile-driver. The server barely had time to bleep electronically before it broke up into a pile of separate, sparking parts.

Mel’s recabled monitors cut out immediately, destroying her database instantaneously. She was about to run at the blonde woman when the other one came up from behind her and, almost lazily, grabbed her in a necklock. It took only a second for Mel to realise that this person was, quite effortlessly, throttling her and that if her windpipe didn’t give way first her neck certainly would.

Mel had faced a number of life-threatening situations before, but on alien planets or spaceships the fact that someone or something was

trying to kill her had had a slightly bizarre effect. Part of her brain released endomorphins, or whatever they were called, and these stimulated her into a brave, heroic act – or the simple expedience of running for her life.

But this was the first time Mel had faced someone on planet Earth – a straightforward human being – who was going to kill her simply by tightening her arm muscles as easily as she picked up a book or popped a slice of bread into a toaster.

And, for the first time, Mel was more than scared. She was utterly transfixed with terror. She couldn't scream, she couldn't move. She just accepted that her life was over and hoped her death would be quick and painless.

It was neither.

Her throat was getting drier and she was sure she could taste blood. The panic of not being able to breathe made her hyperventilate, but because her windpipe was blocked no air could get in or out. This was a hideous way to die.

Then the pressure stopped and she dropped to the floor, her eyes streaming with tears, ragged breaths heaving in her chest.

She wanted to look up, find out why her death had been curtailed, but she couldn't. She could do nothing except lie on the cold wooden floor of the library, trying to inflate her lungs and stop her heart bursting through fear, hearing nothing but the far too rapid beat of her frantic heart as it tried to pump blood through her veins once more.

Had she been in a position to look up she would have seen that Evelyn, from her position on the second walkway, had dropped a small metal library stool on to her attacker's head.

Although the pigtailed woman had brushed it off as if it had been just a cardboard box, she had been distracted enough to let Mel go.

Pigtail and blonde caught each other's eyes, smiled and then jumped.

Both of them were on Evelyn's level in seconds.

'Oh dear,' Evelyn said. 'I'm terribly sorry about the stool.'

Just seemed to slip down there. I think you'll find books on the WWF in the sports section, level three.'

The two assassins simply moved closer, boxing her in against the bookcases.

From below, a wooden chair flew through the air, only to connect with the blonde woman's rapidly outstretched fist. It shattered, not even grazing the skin on her knuckles. She glanced down to see Mel scrabbling around for more things to throw.

With a lascivious smile at Mel, she dropped easily back to the floor. Mel thought the blonde woman was ready to scoop her up and snap her like a twig. Still hurting badly from the pigtailed woman's attack, she dropped down on one knee as the blonde swung a punch.

Had it connected with Mel, her head would quite likely have ended several feet from her body. As it was, the blonde's fist connected with one of the oak pillars that formed part of an arch that supported the first tier of books.

The walkway Evelyn was on, which was designed to withstand the weight of tiers of books and students, wobbled slightly.

But Mel didn't notice this. She had rolled so that she was under the first tier with the now cracked wooden pillar in front of her and the other side of the arch behind her. She moved quickly and lithely. Her short, slender body was the only real advantage she had against the inexhaustible killer who was prowling around the library to get her.

The blonde assassin suddenly reared up in front of Mel, thrashing out with her arm and hitting the pillar again with tremendous speed and force.

This time Mel heard the cracks.

The first one was the woman's wrist bones, splintering.

The second came from the pillar, as a chunk of the oak went flying into the far corner of the library.

The result was almost instantaneous. The arch lurched downwards, trying to meet itself where there was now a gap.

Mel hurled herself forward, back to the centre of the room where the destroyed computers lay.

The blonde woman was clutching her fist, ready to go for Mel again, when she, too, realised the danger. Except that she was between the

pillars of the arch.

‘Evelyn!’ screamed Mel. ‘Run!’

If it crossed Evelyn’s mind that, because she was on a circular walkway, there wasn’t anywhere to run to as such, it didn’t show. She just ran as fast as she could to the other side of the library so that she was standing over the doorway to the main hall.

From there she had a perfect view.

The arched pillars split and fell down, pulling the walkway with them. Like a set of dominoes, it started to collapse.

A moment too late, the pigtailed assassin saw why Evelyn was running towards the doorway. She started following her, but the walkway was caving in and after a second or two she fell to the floor with the books and bookcases crashing around her. No sooner had that happened than the remaining tiers came crashing down, bringing with them the massive domed roof.

The blonde woman must have had the briefest of seconds to realise that her partner had fallen in front of her, and let out a scream of fear and rage before she too was crushed.

Evelyn had one chance and she took it. Before the walkway collapsed completely she ran a few more feet to one of the mobile ladders and leapt down it, barely touching its rungs and using the rail to stop her falling.

She hit the ground at the same time as four storeys of books, bookcases and walkways, plus a great deal of the brickwork and the domed ceiling, crashed on to the floor of the library, burying everything and everyone under tons of concrete, wood, bronze and paper. The wrecked library was now exposed to the elements, as a slight drizzle was proving.

Evelyn was dimly aware of something hitting her and propelling her into the oak doors, which burst off their hinges as they too were pummelled by the destruction.

She was sent spinning painfully into the hallway; shards of wood, bricks and old tomes crashing into her body and on to the floor.

It seemed to last for ever, and the noise was deafening.

After what might have been a lifetime with her eyes tightly shut, ignoring the sharp pains from the multitude of thumps and crashes her body had been subjected to, Evelyn opened her eyes. Wrapped tightly around her waist, where she had careered into her like a bullet propelling both of them to safety, was the battered form of Mel.

Evelyn eased the girl away from her, ignoring the wracked sobs that came from Mel's already tortured chest.

Instead, she looked back at what had once been a magnificent library and was now a pile of rubble with twisted lengths of wood and thousands of destroyed books over the entire floor.

Mel looked up, red eyes damp with tears of pain, fear and relief that she was alive.

'Anything broken?' Evelyn asked gently, of herself as well as Mel. The younger woman shook her head. 'Miracles do happen, you see?'

Evelyn looked towards the main entrance of the Nelson Mandela Building. The noise would have alerted people and before long the place would be crawling with police and accident investigators and onlookers.

'We need to get away, Mel,' she said. 'Quickly.'

Together they staggered to the entrance, yanked it open and almost fell into the cold and wet afternoon air.

Ignoring the gasps and shouts of passers-by, the two women half ran, half dragged themselves as far away from the building as they could until they were out of sight of everyone.

A distant siren sounded.

Evelyn began brushing them both down. She realised she still had her papers on the dean at Nottingham. Ah well, one day...

'This is going to be very difficult,' she said.

'What is?'

'We have to walk, quite normally, back to the pub and get to our rooms as quickly as possible. Have a long soak, then wash our clothes. By the time the Doctor arrives, we must be ready to get away without anyone at the pub putting two and two together, because I'm sure

they'll hear about this.'

Mel looked at her neon-pink top with its black triangular chest motif. It was now a curious shade of dust. It was ripped and torn and was getting wetter by the second, thanks to the rain. 'I always hated this thing.'

Evelyn nodded. 'I have spare clothes in the boot of the Riley. Tomorrow, the Doctor and I will pop out and buy you some new clothes. No, I will buy you some. I shudder to imagine what he thinks is fashionable for New Year's Eve 1993!'

Taking deep breaths, and hoping none of the now-present police cars would spot them, they moved slowly but surely towards The Railwayman's Arms.

It was lucky crowds had gathered, because it meant that no one paid either of them much attention as they did so.

Chapter Fourteen

A Time to Hear [Who's Listening?]

The Doctor had spent a lot of time in villages during his lifetime, and they had taught him one very important thing.

If you want information, go to the pub.

The Rope Walk Inn in Halcham was a single-barred affair.

The building was about 150 years old, but the interior had been modernised during the 1950s. In that sense, it still had a certain old-world charm that suited both the locals and the tourists. The landlord was an apparently friendly chap called Gary Rudge. He was well-built with a smiling face and twinkling humorous eyes, although the impression of geniality was slightly offset by the double-barrelled shotgun that rested by the boxes of crisps behind the bar. Above it, framed, were his licence, and a hand-written note, the gist of which was that he'd not yet had to use the gun on a customer and it would be appreciated if no one gave him reason to now.

Because it was so close to Christmas and New Year, tourists were thin on the ground although a number of people filtered in and out all the time – locals, the Doctor assumed.

Certainly the pub wasn't doing much in the way of food, to his

disappointment, although Mrs Rudge had agreed to microwave a toad-in-the-hole and promised some onion gravy. The Doctor awaited the result without too much eagerness and instead spent ten minutes talking to a man seated opposite the blazing log fire, wallowing in the warmth. He was one of the locals – whom the Doctor was delighted to discover, in an

‘only in the countryside could you find such a thing’ way, was simply called Old Tommo – about the history of the Malvern cave and the strange lot who lived in it at the moment.

The only thing Old Tommo didn’t know was their names.

‘Ere, Gary,’ he said, ‘what’re them lot up by the cave called, then?’

Rudge looked at Old Tommo then at the Doctor, and plonked down a huge plate of food. Toad-in-the-hole buried under thick onion gravy, fresh peas and potato skins. Just a whiff of it caused the Doctor to entirely re-evaluate Mrs Rudge’s cookery skills.

He took a mouthful of sausage and batter. ‘This, Mr Rudge,’ he mumbled, ‘is quite, quite delicious. My compliments to your dear lady wife.’

Rudge nodded appreciatively, but still wasn’t keen on the Doctor. ‘Why’re you asking about the lads and lasses up there then?’ he asked, with a jerk of his head in the general direction of the cave.

‘Oh nothing,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m a journalist, looking for a good Christmas story. Christian charity and all that.’

‘Oh aye?’

‘Mmmm.’ The Doctor stopped eating for a second. ‘You see, not many people in a village like this would just adopt a group of young people the way you have.’

‘Ah,’ said Old Tommo. ‘That’s a-cause of the squire.’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Squire?’

Rudge leant towards Old Tommo. ‘I think you’ve been in

‘ere a few too many hours, Tom,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you nip home, and on the way say hello to the vicar for me.’

The Doctor easily guessed that this was a code for something – that

experience of English villages again – but he didn't let on.

'Oh,' he said sadly. 'Oh well, Tommo, if you must go.

Thank you.'

Old Tommo tapped his cap and wandered out. Rudge immediately sat down in his seat.

'What do you want then, Doctor?'

'I told you, I'm researching a story and –'

Rudge took the fork of food away from the Doctor's mouth and returned it to the plate. 'You're no reporter. I've had enough of them in here in my time. You're not subtle enough, not in that down outfit.'

The Doctor stroked his lapel. 'I'll have you know, this is the height of fashion on Kolpasha.'

Rudge's mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't. 'Not been to the Balearics, m'self Doctor, so I'll take your word for it.

Now, why are you interested in them kids? You from the Social?'

The Doctor changed tack, very suddenly, and looked very deep and very hard into Rudge's eyes. The man almost recoiled.

'No, but I'm concerned about them. They're an Irish couple, right? Twins. Don't say much. Bit cold, if you get my drift. Then there's the kids. I know at least one of them is called Joe Hambidge and –'

There was the sound of a door opening and closing, and what the Doctor guessed to be the local vicar joined them at the table. 'Stephen Cummings, Doctor. Old Tommo said you wanted to see me.'

'He did? I did?'

'You did,' Rudge confirmed.

'Thank you, Gary,' Cummings said. 'We'll talk later.'

'Right you are, vicar.' And Rudge was gone.

'In a community like this, Doctor, in the absence of the squire, I seem to have taken his place as, well, village leader.

If there's anything you need to know, feel free to ask me.'

The Doctor smiled at the vicar for a moment. Then he returned to his food.

'So, Mr Cummings, perhaps you can explain to me why the Irish twins are living here.'

'Why shouldn't they?'

The Doctor decided to gamble. 'Because they are killers, vicar. Not wishing to be overly melodramatic, they have blood on their hands.'

'And you're here to take them in, are you Doctor?'

'That remains to be seen. I'm here to talk to them. It's been a while since I saw them, but they know me.'

'And should they be frightened of you?' The vicar helped himself to a potato skin.

'You don't ask whether you should be frightened of them.'

I've just told you they are responsible for a number of deaths.'

'Doctor, I have been the voice of reason, as well as the voice of God, around here for many years. This is a good village and we have taken them under our wing. They are part of us now. We like them.'

Despite what I've told you?'

The vicar shrugged. 'I'm not surprised. I actually guessed something along those lines. The teenagers seem very withdrawn, and Cellian and Ciara are not entirely forthcoming either. But I'll tell you this. If they are running from a past, it's a past they have put behind them. They seem to want absolution and I believe it is my duty to enable them to find it if I can. If this is the right place for them.'

The Doctor finished his food. 'You are a good man, Mr Cummings. But allow me to ask myself whether you may be a foolish one.'

'That I may be, Doctor. But I like them, all of them. They are, as I say, a part of our life now and I intend to make sure they stay that way for as long as they wish to.' He smiled.

'That is also the squire's wish, and they are his direct responsibility.'

The Doctor sat back, feeling quite content as far as food went. 'Ah yes, the squire. Lives up at Malvern Hall I assume?

I passed it along the road.'

The vicar nodded. 'A nice man, Sebastian Malvern. His family have been part of this village for centuries. If you have a quarrel with the twins, I suggest you take it up with hi-'

The vicar stopped. The Doctor turned to follow his line of sight.

Standing in the doorway of the pub was Ciara.

Slowly she walked over to their table. 'Good evening, vicar,' she said, and for the first time the Doctor realised he'd never heard either of the twins speak before. Not clearly. She had a quite beautiful voice.

'Doctor,' she said, 'thank you for coming. We have much to discuss.'

The vicar merely tilted his head. 'Are you sure, my dear?

Would you like me to come with you?'

She almost smiled. 'No. No, thank you Mr Cummings, but, as I'm sure he has informed you, the Doctor and my brother and I have a history. It is one that we need to explore between us. Meanwhile, I look forward to seeing you all tonight for the festivities.'

The Doctor stood, smiled at the vicar and then turned to look Ciara straight in the face. 'Please. Lead on.'

Ciara led him to the doorway and then out.

Seconds after they'd gone, the vicar crossed to the bar.

'Gary, can I use your phone? I need to call the squire.'

'No need, my dear Stephen,' said a voice from beside the fireplace. 'I was listening to it all.'

The vicar looked relieved as Sebastian Malvern walked over.

'I'm worried. If this man, this Doctor, is here to hurt them, well...'

'Oh, don't worry, Stephen,' said Malvern smoothly. 'I think we may all find that the Doctor will turn out to be one of our very best friends.'

Therése Gavallo took a deep breath, and tapped on John Doe's grey office door.

She quite liked the grey – everywhere else was horribly transparent, which she rather thought reflected the irony of a top-secret department, but the grey made her feel... well...

solid.

‘Come in, Captain.’ She held down an involuntary shudder. His nasal whining voice was one of the disagreeable aspects of her current employer which continued to irritate her.

She opened the door, ready to make her report, and was surprised to see Dr Brel and that security adviser – Devin was it? – in the room with Doe.

If Brel and Devin knew nothing of the Magnate, how was she to make her report succinctly?

Doe gave her an oily grin. ‘I’ve just been telling dear Christophe here how you’ve found us a replacement for the sadly departed Michael Dudley. I’ve even pointed out how clever you were at securing another American.’

‘Is nationality important, Monsieur Doe?’ asked Devin.

‘No, not at all,’ he replied. ‘I just thought it was an interesting point. Sorry I brought it up now.’ He waved his hand towards them. ‘Thank you gentlemen, you may go.’

Doctor Brel, sort young Trey Korte out will you. Oh, and Maurice?’

Devin turned back as Brel went down the stairs. ‘*Oui?*’

‘*Et nos lesbiennes ravissantes? Encore en Angleterre?*’

Dés qu’elles retourneront, j’aurai une petite tache pour vous trois en Allemagne. Il vous faut de l’équipement pour le voyage et du logement pour deux semaines. Arrange le, d’accord?’

Doe realised Gavallo and Devin were staring at him, open-mouthed. ‘What now?’

Gavallo shrugged. ‘You... you spoke fluent French to Devin.’

Doe laughed. ‘Oh very funny...’ he broke off as he realised they were

serious. 'I did what?'

Devin nodded. ' *Oui*. You told me to take Ms de Meanour and Ms Feasance to Germany for two weeks when they get back. It was perfect.'

Doe sat heavily. 'But how? I've not been able to learn anything.'

Gavalle sat opposite him. Devin was still hovering by the door. 'Perhaps,' she said slowly, 'perhaps your memory is returning, after all. And maybe you spoke French before your... accident.'

He looked at her, like a child who had just discovered his parents were coming to visit. 'Do you think so? Oh gosh, that's splendid!' He looked to Devin. 'Maurice, get Brel back here, I want his opinion on this!'

Devin obediently hurried away.

Doe smiled at Gavalle. 'And how was the home country, my dear?'

'Your home country, monsieur. It was cold, wet and full of smug Englishmen with their castles.'

'Ah, you met Mr Malvern, of course. Very favoured by the Magnate, best keep on the right side of him. Now, presumably the lovely ladies are dealing with our Sheffield problem?'

Gavalle glanced at her watch. 'They should be making their way to London now, ready to catch the Eurostar back here for the morning. I'm sure they will have been as efficient with whoever it was as they were with that twisted little creature in Brighton.'

Doe steepled his fingers and sat back in his chair, bringing his feet up to rest on the desk. 'And the Doctor?'

'The Doctor? From UNIT? I... I don't know...' Gavalle was confused. What did the Doctor have to do with this?

'Oh come on, Captain. Who else set his people to work in Sheffield? Who else was young Korte trying to contact from Brighton? My web spins ever tighter.' Doe reached out and tossed a photo of a white-haired-man in a ridiculously frilled evening shirt and velvet jacket. 'He, Captain Gavalle. He is *my* target in all this.'

Trey Korte's mind was in turmoil.

Joe. He'd seen Joe. Spoken to him.

A 'gift' from the Irish twins. And all he had to do in return was save the world.

Again.

He laughed to himself. 'Becoming a habit, this,' he decided.

He sat up. He was in a white plastic coffin-like device, attached to a central hub like a spoke on a wheel. There were...

one... two... yeah, seven others. He looked behind him – on the hub were a series of tiny monitors with ever-changing wave patterns. Brain patterns – he recognised his own instantly. For a telepath, they were as easy to recognise as a written signature is to a non-ESPnet.

Oh well, he was here, where the twins had explained he needed to be. Time to 'wake up' properly.

He eased himself out of the coffin thing, noting that a thin fibre optic leading to the monitors had been attached to his neck. He experimented with moving. The fibre optic flowed easily out of the central hub, so there was no chance it would be pulled out and set off whatever alarms there might be.

He stared at the nearest coffin – asleep in it was an attractive young girl. Mediterranean by the looks of it.

He reached out with his mind, trying to find hers. It wasn't difficult.

'Hello,' his mind said.

'Hi,' she replied with a heavy French accent. 'I can't greet you properly. They've pumped us full of drugs – our bodies can't move very well. Meet the gang.'

Trey was aware of a host of other minds suddenly. 'May we scape it?'

'Of course, old chap,' said a terribly clipped English voice.

'Jamie Lanagan, pleased to meet you.'

Trey was suddenly somewhere else. A misty dark room.

Circular. Eight doors. A central dais was connected to each door by a fibre optic.

‘Best we can do,’ said a voice that was either Australian or South African. Trey could never tell the difference.

Seven of the doors opened and his fellow ESPnets revealed themselves. All were naked and yet completely asexual in appearance. Only their faces gave any indication of real physicality.

Of course, to ESPnets on an astral plane such as this, the physical world is irrelevant.

He saw the girl he’d looked at on the real plane of existence.

‘Rosa Marie.’ She held out her hand formally. ‘TeeKay.’

‘Jamie Lanagan,’ said an older man. ‘TeePee.’

A small man with a lazy eye shook Trey’s hand. ‘Yves Garaud. Wire.’

Another woman just nodded, from somewhere Indian.

‘Shari Gotell. Heater.’

An oriental man grinned widely, his eyes glowing with good humour. ‘Yoshiro Taikwana. They call me Josh here.

I’m an EeKay.’

‘Torrance Hayton,’ said the voice Trey hadn’t been able to identify. He now knew the man was from Johannesburg – just picked that up from... well, connecting with him. ‘I’m a bit of a mishmash. I’m a TeePoh and also a TemPoh. The two often go hand in hand, I gather’

‘Useful,’ said Trey. ‘Manipulating time now?’

Hayton nodded with a smile. ‘Slowed it down to a crawl.

For every five minutes in here, a couple of seconds is passing out there.’ He waved into the void beyond their line of vision.

‘When I’m not being kept stupefied, I can stop time for about twelve minutes max.’

Trey’s attention turned to a very attractive blond young man. Stop thinking with your libido, Trey, he chastised himself.

‘Hi there. And who are you? What do you do?’

Jesus, how loaded was *that*?

But the young man shrugged. 'I'm useless. I'm just an empath,' he said with a slightly nasal English whine.

Rosa touched his arm. 'Don't put yourself down, *mon cher*. It's you that holds us together. Keeps us sane.'

Trey laughed. 'Well, good thing I'm here, then. Because I've got lots to tell you and sanity is one thing we're going to lose en masse if we're not careful.' They looked at him expectantly. 'My name is Trey Korte and –'

Yves Garaud butted in, his head cocked to one side, twitching lizard-like as he downloaded information. 'Korte, Trey J. Born 1970, Chicago, USA. Father appears on various databases but not considered a security risk. You helped the United Nations four years ago stop a former British government operative from using extraterrestrial forces to accede to power. Since then, a variety of jobs for various local police forces and government agencies.' He glanced over to Trey. 'Oh, and you are what I believe your fellow countrymen refer to as "a flamer". But no one considers you a security risk'

Gee, thanks Yves, Trey thought. Like I really needed you to point that one out.

Instead he shrugged. 'That a problem for anyone? Because it shouldn't be. What we've got to do goes slightly above crap like that, OK?'

He glanced at his new companions. Only Hayton seemed to regard Trey with a bit of hostility and the English guy – still hadn't got his name yet – seemed terrified. Ah, what the hell...

'Right guys, let's talk.' He glanced at Hayton. 'How long can you give us?'

'Five minutes, max. Are you standing or are you lying in your "coffin"?'

'Standing, looking at Rosa.'

'Damn,' Hayton sucked air in as he considered this. 'Make that three minutes to be safe.'

Trey sighed. 'OK, here goes. There's someone in England I need you to meet. I'll see if I can bring him here.' He closed his eyes and thought,

just as the twins had instructed him to (yeah right, just why was he trusting them anyway? Ah well...

) and concentrated.

Harder than he'd ever concentrated before.

The train had arrived at the Gare du Nord exactly on time, which was unusual to say the least. But useful.

The journey to the catacombs had been simple and efficient and the taxi had pulled up relatively close by, so time wasn't being wasted.

Everything was going to plan. Such as it was.

Of course, there may well have been agents on the train, agents even now watching. Observing. Reporting back.

One quick bullet – BANG – no one would know.

Just another corpse, lying in a pool of blood somewhere, mystified police and all that.

Having bought the ticket at Waterloo, got on the train and ferreted into a seat, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, it was just like the old days.

Except in the old days, you knew who the enemy were.

They were the guys with the Schmeissers, SS uniforms and planes with black crosses on the side.

Nowadays, the guys you were fighting were the ones your lads had given their lives to defend. The enemy were men in suits who arranged for the Woodys or Mr Fixits of this world to die and vanish overnight – as if they'd never existed.

'I'm a dinosaur,' he had said to a female passenger, for no readily apparent reason, just as they hit Ashford.

Understandably, the young lady had changed seats after 'going to get a cup of coffee'.

As he stood and stared at the ticket seller at the start of the catacombs, Vice-Marshal Charles Dickinson (rtd) understood that this might be it. Might be the one he never came back from.

If Woody had been a plant, a device to get rid of a retired airman, elderly and incapable of looking after himself, so be it.

But bugger them all, he was here. Didn't need a nurse to see him all the way to Paris.

Still life left in the old dog yet.

And as he wandered into the darkness, looking at the skulls embedded in the walls, he wondered who they all were.

Faceless, nameless. All identical. Once upon a time they would have been as easy to tell apart as chalk and cheese.

Now they were calcified bones; no one even knew their names.

If he was headed for the same thing... well, that's life.

No one would remember him either.

But he would know he had gone down fighting for a reason. A cause. A crusade. The need to *know* the truth rather than hide the truth as those Whitehall types seemed to be doing.

He smiled as he thought back to his friend's letter. 'Think about your old training. Secret societies, they're the same the world over.'

It was an old wartime code that today's desk jockeys would never understand. To do with the magnificently brave chaps and ladies of the French Resistance. Here in Paris. This was one of their old stomping grounds, where they hid airmen.

The vice-marshal should know. He'd been in charge of getting them out sometimes. 'Secret societies, they're the same the world over.' Letter code, in English so that the Jerries, who could barely speak French let alone English, wouldn't break it.

He counted nineteen skulls along from the start of the tour.

Nineteen down. Press. Twenty along, Twenty down. Press.

Nineteen along, twenty down. Press. Twenty-three along, fifteen down. Press. That last one was through some bars.

Obvious really, different colour and texture to the rest. Not a real skull. Plastic, probably.

As he pressed, the vice-marshal heard the dull ‘clunk’

from some way back.

Something had unlocked. Now all he needed to do was work out where.

That storeroom, indented into the wall. Obvious really.

Hide the secret in full view – typical French Resistance trick.

He opened the door – these things usually had a thirty-second delay, so he had time. Small cupboard, cleaner’s room by the look of it.

Bucket, mop, jacket, clipboard, amber beam of light scanning him.

Hmmm, not so good. Hadn’t thought of that.

Oh, and that noise just must be an alarm. Of course, were he a normal, everyday person he’d leave the cupboard and apologise sheepishly to the ticket collector for tripping something.

But not the vice-marshal. If there was something they wanted kept secret, he wanted to investigate it.

So he stayed put.

Eventually the alarm stopped and he presumed that whoever had activated it was intrigued enough to meet him, as the room was now going down. A long way. It was a lift.

It stopped with a judder and the wall in front of him slid away to reveal a very hi-tech three-storey affair, walls and floors made entirely of glass.

Men and women in white coats or suits were walking around – the transparent surfaces gave the impression that some of the people above eye level were walking on the air.

Three men in white coats raced towards him and one of them ran a metal detector over him. Another swabbed his neck, then jabbed him with a needle.

The vice-marshal stood stock-still. Give nothing away and make them answer his questions whilst they asked theirs.

‘*Bonjour, monsieur,*’ said a thin, balding man who walked through the

detector people. He was dressed in a sharp Armani suit or some such foreign nonsense. He wasn't smiling, however, despite his greeting.

'Hello, old man,' said the vice-marshal. Let the enemy know he was English – his French wasn't too good these days and it'd help if they spoke to him in a way he could actually understand.

One of the men had removed his passport and wallet and rifled through them before passing them to the suited man.

'I am Maurice Devin, head of security, Mr... ahh...' he looked at the passport, 'Dickinson. You seem to have got lost.'

'No,' said the vice-marshal. 'Were I lost, I would have left your little lift the moment the alarm started.' He smiled tightly. 'I'm not lost at all.'

'Why are you here, monsieur?'

'I'm looking for my son. I have reason to believe he's here.' Devin shrugged.

'And why would your son be here, Monsieur Dickinson?'

This is a French government operation, as I'm sure you have guessed.'

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

'Bull, old man. This is the headquarters of the Network,'

the vice-marshal said squarely. 'My son is, I believe here, possibly unaware of exactly who he is. Had an accident I was told.'

He'd clearly said the right thing. Devin's shoulders tensed and he immediately started giving orders to the people around him.

'Can't help thinking you should've shot me the moment I walked through the door, Devin. Can't say I'm impressed with security.'

Devin frowned. 'Not a problem. If I wanted you to die, I would shoot you now. Your body would turn up. Eventually.

Somewhere embarrassing to you, not us.'

The vice-marshal nodded, understandingly. 'Couple of young hookers, probably. My head in a plastic bag, orange in my mouth, red, with kinky videos around, yes?'

Devin laughed. 'How strange you English are. All you think about is sex. But yes, I suppose that would be one way.'

A little ... melodramatic though. No, you'd just be found in a lake somewhere, drowning your sorrows, so to speak.'

The vice-marshal smiled grimly. 'Well, that's all right then. Couldn't bear a scandal. If I'm dead, I wouldn't get the benefit of all that newspaper exposure.'

Devin passed his documents back to him. 'I would offer to show you around, Monsieur Dickinson, but I cannot yet guarantee you will be alive long enough for it to be worth my while.'

'Who is this?' snapped a balding man walking past. 'Has he been tested?'

Devin nodded. 'Yes, Brel, His DNA is being crosschecked now.'

Brei wandered off.

'Visitors a regular occurrence?'

Devin was impassive. 'Sometimes. But not often. Most of them are expected. You're ex-military, yes?'

'Royal Air Force. How did you guess?'

Devin waved generally upwards. 'Spotted you as you came in. You knew which skulls to press.' Devin smiled slightly. 'You were involved with the Resistance, yes? My parents, too. There's a monument on the quayside at Cannes with their name on. Maybe you met them.'

'Maybe. We didn't use names, you know.'

Devin nodded. 'Of course not.'

The vice-marshal smiled back. 'You were testing me. If I'd asked their names, you'd know I was a liar.'

'Indeed.'

'Of course, I still could be. Ever heard of the double-bluff?'

'Ah, how English you are, Mr Dickinson. Or should that be flying officer?'

‘Vice-marshal, actually.’

Devin seemed impressed. ‘The free world has much to thank your generation for. All too often, the kids today, no respect. No wars, you see. Nothing to make them patriotic or proud of their heritage.’

Before the vice-marshal could answer a man opened a door on the other side of the atrium. He was dark-haired, thin and fussy-looking.

As he walked over he spoke in perfect, slightly upper-class English.

With an insincere smile, he offered his hand. ‘Hello, they call me John Doe. I understand from Mr Devin here that you are searching for your son, possibly an amnesiac? Tell me, do we know each other by any chance?’

Vice-Marshal Charles Dickinson (rtd) stared at the newcomer.

Stage three of his life was over.

Chapter Fifteen.

A Time to Clear [It Up]

The Doctor stood outside the small two-storey home. It was little more than a cabin, really, originally used by the cave system’s watchmen, he guessed.

The Irish twins stood next to him. All three were looking at the youngsters. The girl was using a Stanley knife to cut some rope, which one of the boys was weaving via an ancient but well-oiled rope-maker. The threads were stretched in a triangular fashion around various wheels which were some distance from each other. As the boy turned the first wheel so the second turned anticlockwise, thus twisting the rope. The third wheel turned back clockwise and in this way the rope wrapped around itself.

The third youngster, whom the Doctor had immediately recognised as Joe from the photograph Mel had shown him earlier, was sitting and watching. He was slowly, and rather badly, peeling some potatoes.

‘Should I be impressed?’ was the only comment the Doctor could make. ‘I mean, yes, they seem to be in good health, enjoying their work, stuck halfway up a hill on New Year’s Eve.’ He shivered and rubbed his arms. ‘It’s quite nippy, isn’t it?’

The female twin, whom the Doctor now knew to be Ciara, pointed at Ashley, the boy with the rope.

‘What do you notice?’

The Doctor frowned and, after a while, shrugged.

‘Nothing. Tell me, is there a point to all this or is a lethal case of rapid frostbite to be my fate?’

‘Think about what you have just said, Doctor,’ said the man, Cellian.

After a few seconds more the Doctor shook his head. ‘I don’t-see what you’re getting at.’

‘Look at Ashley,’ said Ciara. ‘He doesn’t feel the cold.’

The Doctor thought about this. ‘He’s working hard, probably his own body heat is enough to –’

‘Then look at Joe. Hands in that cold water, barely noticing it. They can’t feel temperatures, Doctor. Oh, their bodies are cold I suspect, but the nerves that transmit such data to their brains are... disrupted.’

‘By you, I might point out.’ The Doctor turned back to the twins. ‘Might we go inside your charming abode to talk? I do feel the cold, you know.’

Cellian pointed upwards. ‘My sister and I have the upstairs with Janine. The boys are downstairs.’

‘Oh, very right and proper,’ the Doctor muttered.

‘It was the vicar’s suggestion,’ Cellian said. ‘It had not occurred to us that in their late teenage years two boys and a girl sharing might lead to complications.’

The Doctor snorted. ‘Complications? Oh yes, well, another complication wouldn’t change very much for them, would it?’

He pushed his way past the twins and sat on the one chair the room possessed.

He clapped his hands. ‘Well, I’m assuming you haven’t got me here just to... well, zap me?’ He waved vaguely in the direction of their internally situated guns hidden within their fake right hands.

Almost with embarrassment, Ciara put her right arm behind her back.

‘We don’t kill,’ she said quietly. ‘Not any more.’

Cellian was standing behind the Doctor and, before the Time Lord could react, he wrapped his palms over the Doctor’s eyes.

‘Don’t move, Doctor.’

The Doctor sat very still.

‘What can you see, Doctor?’ Ciara asked, closer now.

‘See? I see nothing. Except the palms of your brother’s hands. Probably.’

‘How do they feel?’

‘Cold.’

‘Like plastic, perhaps?’

‘I know your... your origins,’ the Doctor said slowly. ‘I remember who you are, what... augmentations you have. I have a knack for details like that. Once upon a time I recall you chasing me around a secret weapons base in Northumberland. Trying to kill me, I believe.’

‘A long time ago. For all of us,’ said Cellian. ‘Please stand.’

The Doctor did.

Cellian continued talking, as he gently eased the Doctor forward.

‘I can’t see, remember?’

‘Precisely,’ Cellian said. ‘Stop. What’s to your immediate left?’

‘I don’t know! Oh really-’

‘What’s to your left,’ Cellian said, slightly more sharply.

The Doctor breathed deeply. ‘A... a futon, folded out as a bed, I think. A red blanket, or duvet, or something similar.’

‘Good. And to your right?’

‘Another two. I think there’s a lamp on a small cupboard between them.’

‘What colour is the rug beneath your feet?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Or the lampshade on the light in the ceiling?’

‘I... can’t remember... A shade of red, I think.’

Ciara spoke. ‘How many steps did we climb?’

The Doctor was getting tetchy now. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t think I’d need to remember!’

‘No,’ said Cellian. ‘No, you took climbing the steps for granted.’

He whipped his hands away. ‘Now what can you see?’

The Doctor let his eyes refocus, readjust to the light.

‘Well,’ he said finally. ‘Not bad. I got the futons right. Shame about the lampshade but green is not a memorable colour. Do you want me to count the steps?’

‘Have you ever been blinded, Doctor?’ Ciara asked.

‘Properly so. Not just for five minutes but long enough to lose your sense of self, to lose your perspective as to where you are, where you were and where you might be going?’

‘I’m familiar with the concept,’ the Doctor replied, slowly.

Ciara nodded. ‘Imagine how we felt, Doctor. Four years ago you and your friends Melanie Bush and Trey Korte effectively opened our eyes after years of death and destruction. The lives we took, the families and people and events we devastated are, frankly, without number to us. We obeyed our orders to the letter without thinking.’

‘Without feeling,’ Cellian added.

‘Not because we wanted to, but because we were programmed to.’

Cellian nodded. ‘Four years ago we kidnapped those three outside. We took them and altered their minds, laid new senses of self and purpose over the originals. We made them extensions of ourselves. As we did someone else’s bidding, so they did ours. Unlike us, they never killed anyone physically, but they caused deaths. Blood is on their hands although they don’t remember it.’

‘For two years, Doctor, they remained virtually catatonic.

But, just as our eyes had been opened, we had to do the same for them.’

‘But slowly, otherwise the damage to their minds could prove disastrous.’

The Doctor sat down again. ‘So you brought them here?’

‘Not at first,’ Cellian replied. ‘We travelled around. But eventually we encountered a man who wanted to help us A powerful man who could use his mind like no one else on Earth. A natural gift, not artificially added on like ours.’

Ciara took up the story, squatting on a futon. ‘You see, we couldn’t afford to trust people. We had been betrayed by those who did this evil to us and we wouldn’t be fooled again. And we owed it to Ashley, Joe and Janine. We had to find a way to save them, undo what we had done. This man offered us a way to do that.’

The Doctor leant forward, his eyes bright with concentration. ‘You found a human, a person with natural extrasensory perception powerful enough to help the children?

On Earth?’

The twins nodded simultaneously, in a way that still slightly alarmed the Doctor. Last time he’d seen these two close up they were ready to murder him. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with the new version. Yet.

‘But there was a price.’ Cellian smiled grimly.

‘There always is,’ the Doctor replied.

‘To be blunt, he needed our help to save the world. But we’re not powerful enough.’

‘So you sought me out? How flattering.’

‘It wasn’t difficult. Arranging for one of your friends to find out about our community here, making sure we were photographed by the school. We knew it would draw you out eventually.’ Ciara shrugged. ‘There are... complications.’

‘Now hold on,’ the Doctor said suddenly. ‘Don’t think for one moment

that I am entirely convinced by your absolution routine. What you did previously was terrible. Evil. You cannot just say sorry and hope everyone forgives and forgets.

Atonement is earned. Saints and others have sacrificed far more than you to make up for deeds that are a pinprick on an elephant's hide compared to your crimes. I'm sorry, I cannot offer you atonement. You should see your friendly vicar for that.'

Cellian was leaning forward urgently. 'Doctor, we're not doing this for ourselves. Not entirely, anyway. It's those three outside – we have to protect them. If anything happens to us we need to know they'll be safe. Well looked after. They can't go home.'

'Why ever not?'

Ciara sighed. 'You saw them. They are a shadow of their former selves. They have families and friends who probably think they are dead. Better off for them if they had been.'

'You don't believe that,' said a suddenly softer Doctor. 'If you did, you would have seen to it.' He relaxed into his chair.

'All right, let's say, hypothetically, that I believe you. That, hypothetically, I accept your story and that, hypothetically, I might be interested in helping you to help them. What, hypothetically, is the danger the planet faces?'

Cellian sat on the floor. 'Have you heard of the Magnate?'

The Doctor almost laughed. 'Is that it? A bunch of shadowy figures plotting and prodding around the world, pushing Russia to build three more nukes, easing Iraq into sending a couple of spy planes into Chinese territory? Hardly a world-shattering threat, I must say.'

Ciara shook her head slowly. 'The Magnate is none of that, Doctor. That's a smoke screen. That's what people are supposed to believe. But the truth is far worse.'

'Go on then. Consider me your little fish. I've bitten the bait, so now reel me in.'

'We want you to go and visit this man.'

'Your hypothetical super ESPnet?'

Cellian looked out of the window, towards the far side of the village, back the way the Doctor had come. 'We want you to talk to Sebastian Malvern.'

All day long the repair crews had been at work on the Nelson Mandela Building. The outer area of the library, records room and JCR were undamaged, but the mess in the central research library was... well, a mess.

The first thing the services had done was secure the ceiling from the outside, first ensuring that no more debris would come loose and fall on to the rescue workers' heads, and then covering the area with a tarpaulin to ensure the rain and other bad weather couldn't get in.

Then the clear-up had begun. First of all, the remaining parts of the walkways and arches were properly dismantled and carted away. As much as possible would be salvaged and used in whatever rebuilding took place later.

A couple of librarians and experts on the contents of the library were on hand to oversee the careful removal of books, manuscripts and documents. Although they were not allowed less than ten feet from the devastation, they were able to see that a huge amount of stock was saved, certainly near the top of the pile of rubble. They were also aware that a great deal would be damaged, even destroyed, and were now waiting anxiously as layer after layer of the destroyed building was sifted through and removed.

Slabs of concrete were occasionally found, but most of the damage had been done by the wooden flooring of the walkways. Or by small but heavy bricks that had fallen from high up.

About four hours into the work one of the men cried out.

'I've got a body!' he yelled.

Seconds later two paramedics were in there. The police held back the ever-growing crowd of onlookers so that the ambulance could be brought as close to the front of the building as possible.

In fact, they found two bodies under the rubble, one lying diagonally over the other, almost like a shield.

'Two women,' muttered a paramedic. 'Poor bitches, didn't stand a -'

'Hang on, Stu,' said the other. 'I've got a pulse.' He checked the second

body. ‘Hell’s bells! From both of them!’

Within minutes, two stretchers bearing the bodies were making their way to the ambulance.

Ghoulish onlookers wanted to see the corpses and were genuinely amazed that their faces were covered with oxygen masks rather than blankets.

‘They’re alive?’

‘Wow, can’t be as much damage as they said then.’

‘Were they thieves?’

‘Bombers! I bet it’s the IRA and they got caught in their own explosion!’

No questions were answered as the ambulance pulled away sirens screaming, towards the city hospital.

In the back of the ambulance Barry, the other paramedic, was gently wiping grime and dirt away from the forehead of one of the women.

‘She must have rock-hard skin,’ he murmured, aware that Stu, whilst driving, couldn’t hear him over the noise of the sirens, ‘Barely a scratch on her.’

Had Barry been concentrating on both his patients he might have lived to see in the New Year. Unfortunately for him, by turning his back on the presumably still-unconscious form of Ms Feasance, he wasn’t that lucky.

Her fist connected with the base of his skull, killing him silently and instantly.

Ms de Meanour opened her eyes and pulled off the surgical appliances that no longer seemed necessary. She looked at her associate. They were both battered and bruised, and Ms de Meanour grimaced now and again rubbing what might have been a broken rib, but otherwise their amazing constitutions had pulled them through.

‘Hey, Bazza,’ Stu called back. ‘We should be there in about three minutes.’

No reply.

‘Barry?’

Nothing.

Stu slowed fractionally and glanced with practised ease over his shoulder.

The last thing he saw was something flying towards his face.

Maurice Devin had been a victim of circumstance – always.

No matter where he went, what work he got involved with, things went wrong.

More than one colleague had jokingly suggested he was cursed. Except that they weren’t joking.

They always *said* they were, but Devin knew better. There was much truth in their remarks.

And it began affecting his career. After an injury during the infamous trade union upsets now referred to as *soixante-huit*, he was invalided out of the gendarmerie and joined the Deuxième Bureau. There he co-ordinated various secret and presidential intrigues. The last twelve years under Mitterand had seen France turn its back on what Devin considered its heritage, and concentrate instead on liberalisations and pandering to the lowest common denominator by creating such wonders as EuroDisney on French soil.

Then, two years ago, an old colleague – who had left the bureau under less than auspicious circumstances – called up and offered him a better way of life. Thus Devin had found himself offered the job of head of security for the Network –

whoever they were. The downside was that whilst he could run things as efficiently he wanted, there was a thorn in his side. John Doe, his mysterious boss, was a lunatic. Apparently, so the rumours went, he had been found walking the bars and cafés of Calais one November afternoon, telling anyone who would listen – which luckily, as he spoke English and the patrons were locals, was no one – how many British security secrets he knew.

Of course, he was amnesiac. He didn’t know who he was or where he came from and under investigation by the bureau, it became clear he had been traumatised by something connected with his work at the headquarters of the British branch of UNIT. John Doe was a name he

invented for himself because he liked American detective television shows and, after a few weeks, he vanished from his safe house.

Devin never thought about him until his first day at the Network, when Doe had tried to palm some vile coffee off on him.

To the weak, like Christophe Brel, Doe was a man to be admired, feared even. Certainly a man to be followed. To Devin, Doe a freak, a piece of British trash to be tolerated until he made the inevitable slip-up.

Then Devin would take his place and explain to the Network how what a traitor Doe had been, and why he had had to shoot him.

He had played that scenario out in his head many times over the last few months. It always ended with Doe's headless corpse at his feet.

One day...

Now another Englishman was gate crashing the Network complex and Devin couldn't wait to be rid of him.

As ordered, he'd told Doe of the man's arrival the moment he mentioned he was looking for his son. Devin had no idea what having his past back would do for Doe, but it wasn't worth ignoring the old man only to have Doe find out later why he had come to the complex.

Now, however, silence reigned.

'Tell me, do we know each other by any chance?' Doe had asked the newcomer, the ex-RAF man.

The man had shaken his head. 'Never seen you before, old chap. Sorry.'

It was as if Doe had been dealt a blow to the solar plexus –

he seemed pained and took his anger out on the old man.

'Devin,' he'd snapped. 'Take this old fossil out of here –

let the local police find his body in the Seine in the morning.'

Then, grumbling, he'd headed back to the little corridor that led to the elevator that would take him back up to his office.

To his credit, the old Englishman had never flinched.

Never reacted as Doe effectively tried and convicted him, and condemned him to death simply for not being his father.

Idiot. Moron.

Devin led the man away – he couldn't take him back out to the catacombs, too many people around – but the Network went quite some way under Paris and they had exits everywhere. It wouldn't be the Seine, but there were a couple of direct routes to the Metro tunnels. A sleeping tramp hit by a train deep underground – no questions would be asked.

He pushed the old man in-the direction Doe had taken.

He'd use the same elevator but go down a level further, into the maintenance corridors and out into the RER tunnel.

As they went into the grey corridor to the lift, the old man suddenly took a step to the right and went into the control room where the ESPnets were housed.

Devin tried to grab him, but was a fraction too late.

‘Justin?’

The old man's voice was weak suddenly. Lost.

Devin stared at what the Englishman was staring at.

The eight ESPnets were all standing upright in a circle, but with their eyes closed.

Facing the transparent doorway into the control room was the young Englishman. Devin recalled that he was referred to as the empath.

Freaks, he called them. Powerful freaks, but freaks nevertheless.

‘Justin? Can you hear me? It’s your father... ‘

The Doctor drove up the long drive to Malvern Hall, his mind awash with conflicting thoughts.

He wasn’t in charge. Events had overtaken him and he was being swept along. Firstly, by the twins: He had made up his mind earlier that he wasn’t going to like them and he was going to storm in and heroically get Joe and the others back, and take them to Brighton.

So much for that idea.

Secondly, although the twins had yet to wholly convince him that they really were changed characters, he agreed to meet with Sebastian Malvern, the local ‘squire’ of Halcham. Squires were as predictable as village pubs, and usually turned out to be dart satanic people who manipulated harmless locals into doing their bidding whilst they plotted and connived with whichever alien being or unearthly force they were in league with.

The reverence with which the twins spoke of Malvern had already made him suspicious. And if he really was as powerful an ESPnet as they claimed, well... what was to say that he wasn’t manipulating them?

And indeed wouldn’t manipulate the Doctor, too.

Of course, he’d know if he was being manipulated.

Wouldn’t he?

Probably not, if Malvern really *was* that powerful.

Hmmm. Interesting dilemma. Walk into the lion’s den and risk walking out thinking he was Daniel, never knowing he wasn’t.

Ah well, go with your instincts, Doctor. That usually works. Nine times out of ten.

Evelyn’s car jerked itself to a stop outside the entrance to the hall, gave a final splutter and that was it.

The Doctor hopped out, gave the bonnet a little pat of thanks and started towards the front door.

His attention was diverted by the big bay window to the left. A fierce

blue glow, as if someone were arc welding, it seemed to be filling the room.

Door?

Unearthly bright blue light enveloping room?

Door?

Unearthly bright blue li-

Oh, no contest.

The Doctor got as close to the window as he dared. He moved cautiously in case someone was looking out, but no one seemed to be. He edged nearer and could just see into the room if he shielded his eyes. The light was fierce, and seemed to be coming from a concentrated source near the fireplace. As his eyes grew accustomed to it, he was able to blink away the afterglow and focus better. A wide column of light shimmered in front of an ornate fireplace. It touched the ceiling and floor, and thin tendrils of blue flame flickered around intermittently.

In front of this column stood a man dressed in smart casual country clothing: tweed jacket, grey slacks. His hands were clasped behind his back and he seemed to be holding a sheet of white A4 paper.

The Doctor only noticed this because, completely unsupported by anything, a red marker pen floated in front of the paper and wrote the words:

GO AWAY! WAIT OUTSIDE!

Then, just for effect, the pen added:

YES, YOU. DOCTOR!

‘Show off,’ muttered the Doctor, giving the room a last look. Just for a brief second, he saw in the blue column of light a face, a not-quite-human visage, its mouth moving as though it were talking to the tweedy man with the magic pen.

He gave the scene a final glance and edged back, away to the car.

He stood there for a moment, watching some soay sheep guzzling me grass on a bank to the right of the house, while a miniature chestnut pony swished its tail at some flying wintry insect.

He dug a sugar lump from his waistcoat pocket and offered it to the pony. It was gratefully received. 'Such a simple life you lead, eh? No worries about whether the world is about to end, or whether people should live or die. Whether a tragedy can lead to some good later. Wondering whether if you let man A die now, men B, C and D will go on to create a better world.' He ruffled the pony's mane. 'No easy answers, eh?'

'I heard you had a good relationship with all of God's creatures, Doctor. Glad to see it's true.'

The Doctor continued to pet the pony. 'Yes, Mr Malvern, although I'm not convinced that your Reverend Cummings back at the village would consider that the creature I witnessed you talking to in there came into the "God's creatures"

category.' He turned to look at Malvern who stood two paces from him, his hand out to shake the Doctor's.

The Doctor was surprised – he hadn't heard, or even sensed, the man's approach. But then, bearing in mind the pen trick, he clearly a man with a powerful mental armoury.

'No, Doctor,' said Malvern, 'I just learnt a long time ago to mo very quietly. "Even a leaf dropping may be heard by the man who listens," as a great man once said. I prefer to ensure that anyone listening, whoever they are, hears nothing.'

The Doctor, not sure that he liked people mentally eavesdropping, gingerly returned the handshake. 'Nice sheep,'

he said simply.

Malvern smiled. 'I'm glad you like them. Soay are rather rare these days. Did you know, Doctor, that sheep and cows are the products of genetic engineering from an era when that term hadn't been thought of? Centuries ago cows were thinner, longer animals – to accommodate four stomachs they needed to be. And sheep were like the soay – brown, unpleasant coats, thin bodies and legs. But man needed food and needed wool, so he bred and bred and bred until his sheep had soft white wool he could utilise, until their bodies had more meat that he could eat. Cows are the same, changed into the stocky walking food factories that we see today.' He patted a sheep absently.

'Mankind is being genetically manipulated too. Someone is seeking to exploit the human mind, Doctor, and the powers dormant within it.'

The Doctor shivered. 'It's rather chilly out here.'

Malvern looked up at the sky. 'Do you realise that in some parts of the world it has been New Year's Eve for some hours now? Indeed, in the Philippines it's around mid-evening. For them, it'll be New Year's Day in about six hours. In theory.'

'Is that a threat?'

Malvern laughed. 'Heavens, no. Just a dire warning. Come inside, Doctor. Let's get you warmed up.'

With a last look at the sheep and pony, the Doctor allowed himself to be ushered inside, keeping an expert eye out for traps escape routes.

Malvern stopped as they reached the interior of the hall.

'Honestly, Doctor, I'm on your side. Trust me.'

The Doctor pushed past his host and went left, into the study he'd viewed earlier from outside.

No blue column of light.

He threw himself into a comfortable crushed-velvet armchair and swung his legs up on to an antique mahogany occasional table. 'I find it difficult to trust a man who not only plucks my every thought from my mind without so much as a

"do you mind awfully", but also associates himself with two of the most merciless killers it has even been my misfortune to confront.'

Malvern stood next to his feet. The Doctor stared at him.

Hard. His steel-coloured eyes seem to get greyer as he regarded Malvern.

'And if you can read my mind as easily as all that, you know that deep, deep down, I can be a very unaccommodating person to those I distrust.'

Malvern crossed to a drinks cabinet and poured himself a particularly fine Armagnac VSOP. He proffered the bottle to the Doctor, who waved it away politely. 'Anything?'

'Iced water, please.'

With a shrug, Malvern emptied a flask of water into a chilled glass and added three cubes of ice and a slice of lime.

‘Even water as good as that supplied by our local springs needs a slight top-up in taste.’ He crossed to the Doctor and handed him the drink. The Doctor nodded graciously.

Malvern looked down at him, and for the first time the Doctor got the impression that behind the squire’s eyes was something else. An age born of experience rather than *tempus fugit*. Perhaps it would be an idea to reassess this young man.

Unless his perceptions were being meddled with.

Again Malvern must have read his mind. ‘There are things you must understand, Doctor.’

The Doctor moved his legs back to the floor. ‘Intrigue me.

Please.’

‘First, let’s discuss the Network, over in France.’

‘The Network?’ The Doctor thought about that. ‘No, means nothing to me. Except BBC1.’

Malvern sat down on a splendidly reconditioned Louis XIV chaise longue and toasted his guest. ‘Ever since humanity found a way to coexist in “societies” there have been those who rule and those who are ruled, knowingly or otherwise.

From the kings and queens of the old worlds, through the dukes and duchesses of the Renaissance. As time has gone by, so groups of individuals have grown more insidious, Doctor.

From the hellfire clubs of the eighteenth century to the various leagues of gentlemen in the nineteenth. Small, ambitious, petty men who sought to overthrow or control the “official” status quo. Lords Sandwich and Dashwood tried to harness the powerful netherworlds of devils and magicks. The leagues sought the superweapons of the enemy. By the turn of the century, our beloved British government had set up an R&D

service known as the Forge.’ He looked expectantly at his guest.

‘I believe I’ve been acquainted with them,’ the Doctor sighed. ‘As I’m

sure you know. You seem to know everything else about me.'

Malvern ignored this. 'Of course you have, and with their cousins – C-19, UNIT and, over in Europe, the Network, based in Paris, where your friend Trey Korte is being held.'

'Where you allowed him to be taken. I understand.'

Malvern's eyes suddenly flashed pure blue – the blue of the column of fire the Doctor had witnessed earlier. He leant forward, his voice suddenly harsh, almost... demonic. 'Do you understand nothing, Doctor? Do you not see the battle which is occurring here and now, on the cusp of the new year?'

The Doctor was not going to be put off by a few melodramatic light shows. 'Oh, I'm still interested. Please continue.'

Malvern took a long, deep breath and relaxed. 'Do you know what the Magnate is?' he ventured.

'I believe it is a "shadow government", reputedly running this planet.' The Doctor smiled. 'Wasn't there some sports commentator who became rather obsessed with such things a few years back?'

'And do you believe that? A "shadow government"?'

'No more than I believe the Magnate are in reality nine-foot shape-changing lizards. As the rumours go.' The Doctor finished his drink with an exaggerated swig and put the glass on the table, leaning forward as he did so. He stared straight into Malvern's face, holding his stare. 'Care to offer an alternative explanation?'

'Yes, indeed. The Magnate are a myth. A legend. A deliberate paranoia created to stir up the people of our... sorry, *my* world, I should say. To make us feel vulnerable.'

The Doctor stood up, crossed to the drinks cabinet and prepared to get more water. 'May I?'

Malvern nodded an affirmation.

The Doctor left out the lime this time. 'Vulnerable, eh? To what end exactly?'

Malvern smiled, the blue glow in his eyes completely gone now. 'Ah, that's the million-dollar question, Doctor.' He settled back again on

the chaise longue, and suggested the Doctor should return to his seat.

‘I prefer to stand, thank you,’ the Doctor said.

Malvern shrugged. ‘It’s a long story.’

‘Make it shorter then.’

‘Fair enough.’

The Doctor took in the room as Malvern continued. It was a curious mix of traditional antique furniture and the latest –

indeed as yet unavailable to the general public – technology. A tiny DAT machine sat on a coffee table near the window, and a mini-disc player was resting by the bank of book shelves. A wide-screen television set took up the far end of the room, but had been expertly situated within a teak cabinet.

Malvern was talking – his voice certainly had a slight hypnotic quality, the Doctor decided. He had a gift for making people listen to him – he could have a marvellous career in after-dinner speeches.

‘Many years ago as a young man seeking my place in the world I went to university here in England, but I opted to get as far away as possible from the cloying Oxbridge environs my forefathers had wallowed in. I studied law at Warwick in fact. I had quickly become disillusioned with my ancestral seat of power – the late Sixties had birthed a new kind of politics in Britain, Doctor. A more open-minded one, one that made the division between left and right far deeper and, perhaps, more violent. My father, understandably, was one of those who considered Edward Heath the worst kind of Conservative leader, far too soft and wet. I, on the other hand, saw Anthony Wedgwood Benn as my mentor. As you might expect, two members of the same family, but at opposite ends of the political spectrum, didn’t see eye to eye and my father decided that the one hold he had over me – cash – was to be withheld.

‘So I went abroad, angry and bitter, looking for a way to strike back. As the Beatles had found their guru in India in the mid-Sixties, I found mine in Micronesia in the early Seventies.

He was called Tko-Ma and renamed me Kyto-Ma, bringing me into his faith. But then he learnt something about me that no one else had knew, other than myself, of course. I’m a powerful man, Doctor, mentally. As you surmised. Your friend Trey Korte. He’s grown into a

fine young ESPnet –

level 12 at a guess. Enormously powerful, which is just as well. That's why I had him told that the Magnate were after him, made him fearful. I needed his help. Me? I would be about level 50, if such a thing existed. Possibly the most powerful ESPnet on this planet – I'm also a telekinetic and a few other things. I don't advertise the fact too often.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly. 'I should think not.

Someone somewhere would slice you open, to see what makes you tick.'

'And see if they could duplicate it, create an army of ESPnets.'

The Doctor considered this. If Trey was in Paris... 'Just as this Network of yours are doing in France, perhaps?' he guessed.

Malvern clapped ironically. 'You're learning Doctor.

Except that the Network weren't the first to try. The Magnate did that.'

'I thought the Magnate didn't exist.'

'As a mysterious covert group they don't, no. But the chap you saw me talking to – oh, don't worry, he didn't know you were here – he *is* the Magnate – a useful nom de plume he's adopted, creating a mystique about himself as a result. He's my guru, Tko-Ma, He's also one of a pair of aliens known as the Cylox. About five hundred years ago, maybe a bit less, they were sentenced by some intergalactic court or other to an eternity of imprisonment.'

'I've never heard of them,' the Doctor said dryly. 'Why's that? I might not be up there with you in the parahuman mental stakes, but I've been around, you know.'

'Because the Cylox are, to use terms you and I understand, level 1,000 ESPnets. Entire galaxies could be manipulated by them via dreamscapes. And they were – manipulated and ultimately erased. But, of course, there's always someone, somewhere, a bit more powerful.'

'More powerful than these Cylox? That's pretty powerful.'

The Doctor returned to his seat.

Malvern smiled at him. 'You're a Time Lord, yes?'

'What of it?'

'Nothing. I'm just plucking it from your memory – no, don't bother trying to shield yourself. Gallifrey. Rassilon.

Pythia. Zagreus. Omega. All things you associate with power, Doctor? Dung beetles to the Cylox and motes of dust to those that imprisoned them.'

The Doctor took another long drink. 'Imprisoned?'

'They were sentenced for their crimes to a plane of reality just out of reach of anyone else,' Malvern continued. 'Or so their imprisoners believed. But they were wrong. Mankind had potential – oh, untapped, crude, primitive potential, but this planet has always thrown up the odd mutant like me, with powers the Cylox could use. There are two of us. Tko-Ma used me, his Kyto-Ma, to escape the astral plane. But he had a reason. He sought his brother, Lai-Ma, who had been born into this world many years earlier and had been accessing the dreamscapes of people so that he could take on an acceptable human form. He's an albino who projects images of himself throughout the planet Earth trying to avoid Tko-Ma,'

'And you're involved in all of this because... ?'

'The Magnate – Tko-Ma – is less than appealing. He looks quite monstrous in fact, and is thus unable to walk the planet safely. He has spent the last few years since I enabled him to escape the astral plane seeking out ESPnets. He wants to take himself and Lai-Ma back to their plane of reality to live out their sentence.'

'How awfully benign of him.' The Doctor stood up again.

'So, let me get this straight. You've taken a friend of mine and dumped him in Paris to help you find a way to stop an alien criminal walk the Earth doing, as far as I've seen so far, not a lot wrong. I'm not one for letting the lunatics run the asylum, Mr Malvern, but your albino, Lai-Ma or whoever he is, doesn't seem to be doing anything wrong. You, on the other hand, arranged for Trey to be kidnapped.' The Doctor pretended to consider something. 'Now, which one sounds like the criminal type to me?'

‘Strictly speaking, I arranged for Trey to be looked after for a night by the twins to keep him out of here. The Network actually sorted out the kidnapping. They think I’m just one of their agents.’

‘And are you?’

‘No. I’m playing a dangerous game, Doctor.’ Malvern was suddenly very softly spoken, but firm. ‘I needed Trey outside this house in case the Magnate sensed how powerful he was. I would have preferred him not to be near here at all. I’m working very hard, twenty-four hours a day, to stop the Magnate reading my mind, realising that I have plans of my own. Even just being in the locality, Trey Korte might have been a risk. To himself as well as me.’

The Doctor crossed to the bay window and looked out on to the marvellous view of hills and fields fading into the darkness of the winter afternoon. ‘And why does he matter to you? Why do the Irish twins, or Tko-Ma or Lai-Ma or me for that matter, mean anything to you?’

‘Redemption does happen, you know. That’s how I found the Irish twins. I contacted Ciara through her dreams, brought her and her brother and their charges here to work for me.

They are consumed with guilt for their past actions, Doctor.

Deeds they were exposed to thanks to you, after you destroyed the energy globes that controlled them. I have been using my powers to gradually undo the mental blockages they grafted on to the three youngsters they kidnapped.’

‘Why?’

‘Why gradually, or why at all?’

‘Both.’

‘Gradually because if they awoke one day with their memories and faculties intact after four years without them, they’d go mad. Simple as that. By easing them in over a period of time, they’ll eventually be able to go home. Some are adapting better than others. I’m doing the same to the twins, although sadly they’ll never be entirely who they were.’

‘And why do it at all?’

‘As the Magnate seeks redemption, as the twins seek redemption, so do I. On my return to this marvellous house my parents and I argued constantly. About my life, our heritage, our wealth. One day, I wished they were dead. The curse of being a level 50, you see, is that you should never lose control.’

‘And why did you want to see me?’

‘To explain this to you, so that you would allow Trey to perform the task the twins have given him, on my behalf. He’s going to open the gateway to the Cylox plane from France, and the Magnate, or Tko-Ma, will use that to seek his brother out and return him.’

‘As easily as that?’

‘As Tko-Ma dubbed me his Kyto-Ma and uses me as his connection here, so the albino has an Ini-Ma, a human link, wherever he is. The Ini-Ma and I are, to use an electrical analogy, the earth to their live and neutral wires. The albino’s Ini-Ma must be deactivated and thus he will no longer be able to walk the Earth.’

The Doctor looked at Malvern, seeking any trace of irony or humour. There wasn’t a shred. ‘And I,’ he said finally, ignoring the smug look on Malvern’s face, ‘I suppose I am your Judas goat, yes?’

‘Yes. You’re an alien, with a far stronger physicality than I. You’ll be able to stand the Cylox plane of reality and trap them there.’

The Doctor turned sharply. This was an unexpected turn of events. ‘Them?’

‘Both of them, Doctor. I’m not naive. Once the Magnate, once Tko-Ma, has Lai-Ma safely under lock and key, as it were, what’s to stop him doing what he and his brother did before and the cycle starting again? That’s their crime you see, Doctor. They’ve spent millennia after millennia destroying worlds, just playing hide-and-seek with each other.’

The Doctor thought about this. ‘Like spoiled children... no care, no concern about the lives they destroy?’

‘None.’

‘That’s abhorrent.’

‘I agree.’

‘They say absolute power corrupts,’ the Doctor muttered darkly.

‘Indeed. And the Cylox power has made them utterly, utterly insane.’

The Doctor picked up a cushion and stared at the beautiful embroidery on it. Malvern had finally piqued his interest –

there was a dangerous alien threat. Perhaps he had been hasty in his dismissal of the squire and the twins.

Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something else. Something missing. ‘Tell me more about the Network that you have inveigled Trey into.’

Malvern sighed. ‘Emerged about eight years ago, got their hands on various illegal alien weaponry that European UNIT

forces “lost”. They are led by a fascinating Englishman, Doctor. One day, I would like to meet him, probe his mind. He suffers from a curious malaise and I believe you are the cause of it, once again.’

‘I do have a habit of that, don’t I?’

Malvern nodded. ‘All roads lead to you, Doctor. I’m afraid I don’t know who he is – and neither does he. He hates you, Doctor. You, and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart and UNIT and everyone. I have always assumed from what I hear that he was some plodding UNIT soldier who fell victim to one of your alien invasions, or the Master or whatever.’

The Doctor thought about this. It didn’t really make sense.

‘Why hate me then?’

‘He sees you as the cause not so much of his fall, but of the resultant memory loss. You see, he is personality-less. He has no recollection of who or what he is. All I have managed to ascertain, by digging into a rather troublesome French woman who was here last night and is currently working for him, is that when you were taller and older and drove a yellow car you and the Brigadier let him down. He knows nothing else. Irony of ironies, he calls himself John Doe. Whether he’s taken the American designation as a joke, or because his initials are JD, I don’t know.’

‘Amnesiacs often do that. Use a fake name that, subconsciously, they know bears a resemblance to their real one.’ The Doctor considered.

‘Any idea what he looks like?’

‘The images from dear Captain Gavalle’s mind suggest a rather wet, terribly hoity-toity slack-jawed type. The kind of

“chap” my father would have liked. The kind who read books at Oxford or Cambridge and would have died rather than play soccer or rugby. Or ride a bike.’

The Doctor snorted. ‘Well, no disrespect to the British army, but that doesn’t narrow the field much.’

‘Indeed.’

‘One other thing, Mr Malvern. This Gavalle woman, what’s her role in all this. Hired help?’

Malvern showed concern for the first time, which interested the Doctor. ‘There’s the rub, Doctor. She’s a trap within a trap. You see, she’s met my chum Tko-Ma. Some years ago, although she has no recollection of that, I’m positive. Then when she stayed here, she accidentally stumbled in on Tko-Ma and myself communing, much as you did earlier. He wasn’t too impressed and we had to blank her mind again. You see, like all those he sought out, those with a smidgen of ESP powers, he twisted that gene and turned it to his advantage. Unlike the others, she’s not part of the Network’s ESPnet troop.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t think our John Doe knows she’s an ESPnet. He’s hired her because he believes he’s working for the Magnate – world-domination James-Bond villainous organisation version – and he’s been told to employ her. Tko-Ma, being the Magnate, has told him to do so, but I think for a very specific reason. She wasn’t here long enough for me to probe too deeply with Tko-Ma watching. But he’s given her an ESP power that she’s unaware of, and he will no doubt trigger it in her at a moment most inopportune for us.’

‘For me, you mean.’

‘Then you’ll help me?’

‘You have, to quote my friend Melanie, pressed all the right buttons.’ The Doctor sat back in the chair. ‘Just don’t expect me to trust you.’

Malvern laughed. 'By all means. Healthy scepticism is something I wholly approve of, Doctor. Now, can I get you that brandy?'

'I'll happily join you in a toast to success and all that once this frankly rather sordid little business is complete, thank you.' The Doctor frowned suddenly. 'Mel. Mel and Evelyn.'

'Your companions? What of them? Are they –' Malvern broke off.

The Doctor felt that now familiar tickle in his mind. 'Do you mind?' he snapped, then saw Malvern's ashen face.

'What?'

'Your friends were trying to access information on the Magnate weren't they?'

The Doctor was in no mood for games. 'Yes, you just read that in my head. What of –'

Malvern put up his hand to stop him. 'Doctor, I'm serious.

This is trouble.'

'What is?' The Doctor was suddenly very, very still.

'What are you telling me?'

Malvern swallowed. 'Whilst Captain Gavalle was here she received orders from John Doe in Paris. Someone in Sheffield was hacking into computer files, trying to find references to the Magnate. Being immensely stupid and, of course, totally unaware that Tko-Ma wouldn't be likely to be found on the web, Doe sent his two brutish assassins to stop the hackers.'

Malvern looked hard at the Doctor – a brief flash of blue fire in his eyes. 'Evelyn Smythe and Melanie Bush were in great danger.'

'Were?'

Malvern blew some air from his cheeks. 'The assassins left just after lunchtime. Evelyn and Mel are probably already dead.'

Chapter Sixteen

Saluting the Point of No Return

Trey Korte had given his new companions a final smile of confidence before the world they shared broke up into a million wisps of fog and they woke up.

They were all standing in the coffin room, hands interlocked. Trey had opened his eyes and instantly the others had done so too – they were all in synch with each other.

All waiting for the signal from Sebastian Malvern.

Trey had noted the sudden panic from the Network scientists in the control area – surely the ESPnets were drugged, asleep. Yet here they were, standing, the fibre optics abandoned and hanging limply from the central plinth, their disconnected ends smouldering where Josh had done his work.

Rosa stared at the transparent door and it locked itself.

The technicians were really scared now – the ESPnets weren't supposed to do this, weren't supposed to think independently.

One of them suggested they call Doctor Brel.

Trey smiled, with a slight hint of arrogance. At last he'd found something worthy of his talents.

Working for the British government was in the past now –

here was a team that could make a difference. Now they were aware of the truth, aware that the Network was a front for the Magnate and not the UN, aware that their lives depended on them working together as a team, firstly to destroy the Network, then to concentrate on the Cylox and after that...

after that, well, now there was a challenge.

The circle was broken abruptly when the security chief, Devin, darted into the bustling control area chasing an older man. The circle broke because the blond young Englishman dashed to the door of the coffin room.

'Dad?'

Trey glanced at the others, but they were as confused as him.

Malvern, Trey thought, we have a problem!

Well, join the club, Mr Korte, came the swift response from Derbyshire. And this one needs some urgent attention!

Mel was in her room watching New Year's Eve television. It was nearly eight – surely the Doctor should be back by now?

Evelyn had nipped out to a local shopping mall on the bus, bless her, and brought back some clothes for Mel – a nice Fifties-looking denim jacket and some black Lycra leggings.

A red sweatshirt kept her warm and a similarly coloured ribbon tied her hair back in a ponytail.

Evelyn had gone out again, saying she needed to phone her next-door neighbours and ask them to check on the cottage as she was evidently going to be away a night longer than she had said.

And so Mel was kicking her heels and watching a depressing programme showing where the money made in some recent telethon was going. It was either that or a documentary on a politician she'd never heard of, who had recently resigned due to a scandal involving his niece, a horse and a big party in Lowestoft. Lowestoft! As if anyone could have predicted that anything interesting could happen in Lowestoft!

There was a knock on the door – the surly receptionist from the brunchtime coffee fiasco was there. 'Telephone,' she said waspishly and jerked her head in a 'it's somewhere downstairs but I'm blown if I'll tell you exactly where' kind of way.

Mel thanked her sweetly and trotted down the stairs.

Sure enough, there was a pay phone off its cradle on a small table by the bar. Mel scooped up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Mel?' It was the Doctor. 'Mel, are you all right?'

'Yes. Now. Where on Earth are you?'

The Doctor's anxiety was palpable. 'Never mind me. What happened at the library?'

'You've heard? Oh Doctor, it was terrifying but –'

'Are you all right?'

‘Yes,’ she repeated. ‘Perfectly, now.’

There was a pause, then: ‘Mel, the two women who attacked you. Where are they?’

Mel couldn’t be bothered to ask how the Doctor knew about them. ‘They’re dead, Doctor. The entire building collapsed on top of them.’ Pause. ‘Doctor?’

‘Yes, Mel, I’m here. I’m just checking with someone.’

Another pause. Mel could hear noises in the background.

‘Doctor, where are you?’

‘In a pub. In Halcham. My... my host didn’t have a phone at home. Something to do with not paying his bills, so we had to come to the Rope Walk. Listen Mel, you and Evelyn need to stay together. Where is she?’

‘Why? What’s going on?’

‘Those women... the people I’m with think they’re still alive.’

‘After a ton of concrete hit their heads? Oh come on!’

‘Mel, I’m serious! They are well-trained. Apparently a mountain on top of them would barely slow them down.’

Mel thought about this. She thought about where the Doctor had been going. Slowly, she eased a question down the telephone. ‘Doctor? Doctor, are you by any chance with the Irish twins?’

There was a long pause. Then: ‘Yes, Mel, I am. They are helping me and me them. And before you start shouting, this isn’t the time or place. Now, where’s Evelyn?’

Mel realised her heart was beating slightly faster at the thought of the twins. ‘I don’t know where Evelyn has – oh hang on, here she is... oh...’

‘Mel? Mel!!’

Mel could say nothing. Like Evelyn, she watched as the assassin with the cropped blonde hair gently replaced the receiver, cutting off the Doctor’s cries.

‘You two are rather troublesome,’ the woman said to Mel.

‘The stuff at the library was my idea,’ Evelyn squawked.

‘Why not kill me in revenge or whatever it is you’re here for and let Melanie go.’ It was a futile gesture, but Mel appreciated it.

The pigtailed woman gripping Evelyn spoke. ‘We were told to kill you both. I think we should do that.’

‘Where are you going to take us?’ asked Mel. Any information might be a help.

‘Take you?’ The blonde laughed. ‘Why take you anywhere? We’re quite capable of killing you here.’

‘There’ll be witnesses,’ spluttered Evelyn. ‘Dear heavens, girl, there are customers and staff everywhere.’

‘I don’t-see them rushing to your aid,’ said pigtail.

At that moment, the door to the back office opened and the surly receptionist came out and saw the foursome. She sighed and looked straight at Mel. ‘We have standards here, you know, Perhaps your... ‘ she glanced up and down at the two assassins, ‘ ... friends could meet you elsewhere?’

Mel opened her mouth but no words came out. She simply didn’t know how to react.

The blonde assassin never took her eyes off Mel, but swung out casually with the flat of her hand, catching the receptionist on the side of the neck. There was a scarily loud crack and the young woman dropped stone dead to the floor.

‘I hate rude staff and bad service,’ said pigtail. She looked at Evelyn. ‘Time to say goodbye, grandma.’

‘Don’t worry Mel,’ said Evelyn. ‘The Doctor’ll think of something.’

‘Well, think of something!’ The Doctor was apoplectic, still holding the pub’s dead phone in his hand.

He was standing amidst a crowd which included the twins, the vicar and a couple of pub regulars. However, the object of his plea was Sebastian Malvern, who sat nearby, his fingers pressed to his temples.

'I'm trying,' Malvern said quietly. 'This is not really the place.'

'We could go up to the cave mouth,' said Ciara. 'It's calmer up there.'

'It's also pouring with rain,' the Doctor snapped at her.

'No,' said Malvern. 'No, Ciara's right. That's a good place to send a message from. And easier for what I want to achieve than a crowded room.'

The Doctor didn't bother to argue, too much was at stake.

'Out!' he said suddenly. 'Let's do as Mr Malvern suggests.'

He led the way out, through the rain and up to the cave mouth.

The three teenagers were sitting on the steps of their home, under an umbrella. They rose to greet the twins and Malvern who were close on the Doctor's heels.

'Is this all right, then?' the Time Lord asked.

Malvern seemed to be sniffing at the air as if homing in on something, like a living aerial trying to find a wavelength.

'I think so... ' he muttered, wiping the drizzle from his eyes. 'I need to...'

'Oh, just do it,' yelled the Doctor fiercely.

'I'm trying, but I can't concentrate with you jabbering on!'

Malvern shouted back with equal ferocity, enough to make even the Doctor wince.

Trey? Malvern thought. *Can you read me?*

'Scaping you loud and clear, was the reply.

Good. Have you ever been to Sheffield?

God no came the response.

Damn.

All right, apparently you know a Melanie Bush?

Mel? Yeah... yeah, I do. Is the Doctor with you?

Yes, but think of Mel. I'm going to put an image in your mind. It's an inn in Sheffield. There was a pause: Is Torrance with you still?

Yes, he's here.

Bring him in on this – put your fingers on his temple.

Taking the unsuspecting Hayton by surprise, Trey did so –

and immediately a weaker presence was felt, both by Trey and Malvern. *He's a teleporter and a temporal navigator, but has no TeePee abilities*, sent Trey.

Tough, we'll try and force our way through, Malvern snapped. *Hello? Mr Hayton?* Malvern sent, gently now. *Trust me. I need you to create a 'portstorm at something Trey is going to show you. It is very urgent. Can you do this?*

Hayton's response was lost in the link – Trey was right, he wasn't a telepath by any means.

We'll do it, Trey assured Malvern. *Transmit the image. I'll think of Mel, might focus the teleportation storm better.*

Good idea. Contact.

Contact!

The image of an inn by a railway station popped very clearly into Trey's mind. It might as well have been a photograph, it was so clear. A fraction of Trey's brain was jealous – Malvern was pretty damn powerful.

Thank God he was on their side!

As soon as the image solidified Trey linked it to Hayton's mind.

Hayton shivered slightly at the new experience, but quickly calmed down and focused on the job at hand.

Mel and Evelyn kept their eyes locked on each other. It occurred to Mel that Evelyn's faith might have been displaced.

The Doctor was thirty miles away in another pub.

Mind you, Evelyn had said what she did only seconds before Mel started to say the same to her!

He'd be flattered to know how much they both trusted him.

Mel wasn't sure what happened next. There seemed to be a strange grey glow – it just shimmered in the air between her and Evelyn.

The two assassins gripped them tighter, but it was clear they hadn't been expecting this.

The glow solidified into a kind of moiré floating on the air and Mel felt her assassin tugging at her.

Wait a minute – the assassin was behind her, but the tug came from... from elsewhere.

And suddenly Mel was swamped by the grey moiré. It seemed to grow, blotting out the room, Evelyn, the assassins, everything...

... and everything was replaced by a freezing cold wind, a wet ground.

Mel was lying face down in the mud but she scrambled quickly to her feet. In front of her was a cave mouth and for a moment she thought the pub had been destroyed leaving a gaping hole. But no, her senses told her she was somewhere else entirely.

'Please stay very still,' said a horribly familiar Irish voice.

Mel swivelled around.

Quite a tableau greeted her.

The Doctor was helping Evelyn to her feet.

A younger man in a tweed jacket was standing, arms outstretched towards the grey moiré effect.

The two assassins were sitting together on the ground next to some steps leading up to a small house, holding three teenagers around their throats, but were covered by the Irish twins. The man's strange built-in handgun was pointing at them both. Mexican standoff.

The Doctor called to her. 'Mel! Good to see you. Some friends over there!'

Mel followed his eye line to the assassins and realised who the teenagers were!

Joe, Ashley and a girl she didn't know.

Ashley. Her friend from the hospital in Brighton, where she had first encountered the Irish twins.

And Joe Hambidge. Trey's *raison d'être*.

Neither of them showed any recognition of her.

But at least they were alive. For now. Could the twins kill the assassins without any of the kids getting hurt? It didn't look like it, but...

The Doctor shouted one last thing to Mel. It shocked her, but she accepted it. He was the Doctor after all.

'Mel, the twins are our friends. Do anything they say.

Within reason. Mr Malvern here is going to help me.'

Malvern was struggling with the strain of keeping the teleport open.

'Doctor,' he said through gritted teeth, 'it's taking more than I've got to stop Tko-Ma knowing about all this.'

The Doctor grabbed his arm. 'Listen to me, Sebastian.

Listen! Is that teleport storm thing still operating from Paris?'

'N-no,' gasped Malvern. 'I've taken it over from Hayton.

He's going to be damn busy there soon. In about ten minutes Lai-Ma will begin drawing the Cylox plane into himself, destroying his brother. He'll have complete mastery of that plane and ours. He'll be unstoppable. Then at midnight, as New Year dawns, he'll use the energy, the emotions of everyone celebrating, to strengthen himself and find a way to spread himself into the minds of every person on the planet.

We have to stop him.'

'That gives me ten minutes to stop your Tko-Ma. If I can stop one, it might weaken the other. Without his brother's energy, Lai-Ma might not be able to do what he wants.'

'How d'you figure that out?' Malvern was sweating heavily now.

'Guesswork, mainly. But it makes sense. If they need each other to create power, that power is diminished by one not being around. And

as we don't know where Lai-Ma is, starting with Tko-Ma seems the better option.' The Doctor took a deep breath. 'Use this teleport to send me to him.'

'What? Are you mad? Go to the Cylox astral plane? You'll be killed.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, I... I mean... '

The Doctor nodded. 'Exactly, you don't know. Nor do I.

But I have to try.'

'This teleport is Earth-based, Doctor.'

'You have access to the Cylox astral plane though, don't you? That's how you talk to Tko-Ma. I've seen it in your eyes, there's a part of that energy inside you permanently. You've been bleeding it off, fragment by fragment.'

Malvern laughed. 'You're good, Doctor. Yeah, thought I might try the trick you want to do one day. Thought if I stole some of his power... '

The Doctor tightened his grip on Malvern's arm. 'I underestimated you, Me Malvern. You're a good man.

Activate your link with the plane, and keep it open.'

Malvern nodded, tears of exhaustion trickling down his face. He took a deep, shuddering breath and concentrated on the 'portstorm.

Instantly the grey moiré changed, became a column of electric blue light.

Malvern dropped to his knees, pain clawing its way into the lines of strain on his face.

'Ciara,' snapped the Doctor. 'You have two tasks. One, protect Mel and Evelyn. Two, protect Malvern. This link must be kept open.'

The Irish woman nodded, whilst Cellian kept his gun aimed squarely at the assassins, neither of whom dared to move.

They obviously knew who the Irish twins were. And-exactly what the Irish twins were.

‘Doctor,’ said Evelyn, ‘what’s going on?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Saving the world, the universe, that sort of thing.’

‘Oh well, business as usual then.’ She touched his arm.

‘Good luck.’

He winked at her. ‘Take care. Of yourself and Mel.’

And before anyone could say anything more, he stepped into the blue column of light.

John Doe felt the vibration seconds before his favourite green coffee mug smashed to the floor.

His angry expletive was drowned by the phone ringing.

As he snatched the receiver up, Gavalle ran out of the office to the plate glass-window that looked over the entire Network complex. To the left were the main glass and chrome multilevel work areas, and the exit to the catacombs. To the right, she could just make out the grey corridor with the elevator to where she was now, and she knew that the control area with the coffin room was just out of her line of sight.

Another vibration made the upper level shake again.

‘We should get down there,’ she yelled at Doe. ‘I think your mutant slaves are revolting!’

Doe’s face was twisted with fury. ‘What are you, Gavalle?’

‘What?’

‘The Magnate – they want to talk to you. Not me, but you!’ He almost threw the phone at her.

She grabbed at it. ‘Yes?’

Nothing. Just the dialling tone. There was no one there.

She was about to tell Doe he had finally gone insane when a voice came down the phone.

‘Njah-Ma.’

A voice she had forgotten. Forgotten how totally cold and foreboding it was. A voice she last remembered hearing on Reunion.

Reunion!

It all came flooding back in a rush – every memory she had lost, everything that had happened after the alien attacked her.

‘Of course,’ she muttered. ‘Of course, Master Tko-Ma.’

She dropped the phone and looked at Doe.

He was raving, screaming about betrayal. About how he’d brought her into the Magnate’s world. About how he’d been a fool. ‘I should have known you’d turn on me!’ He was crying now. ‘You military types, United bloody Nations, the lot of you, scheming, twisting, manipulating me!’

Therése Gavalle walked over to Doe, took out her revolver, and pistol-whipped him.

He shut up immediately, and fell to the floor in shock.

‘Come on,’ she snapped. ‘We have work to do for the Master.’ She strode towards the elevator, Doe at her heels like a confused and wounded puppy.

As they left his office for the last time, the picture of the Doctor in his third body fell off the desk and on to the floor.

Forgotten, like so many other things in Doe’s life.

Shelly Kurtzmann nearly died of fright. The albino had appeared almost from nowhere. One moment she was checking the camera’s viewfinder, the next his pallid complexion took up her entire field of vision.

She quickly moved away from the camera and almost walked into that wretched American girl who believed herself to be a monk. ‘You scared me to death,’ Shelly complained to her captor.’

The albino just smiled. ‘How... appropriate.’ He pointed to the camera. ‘Is this primitive device ready to work?’

‘Yes.’

‘And are you?’

Shelly shrugged. 'We have a choice? Daym's just outside checking light sources. It's quite dark in here and as you want to begin your transmission at midnight – according to Ini-Mini-Ha-Ha here – you'll need better lighting than this place offers. Do it at midday tomorrow, you'll look like Larry King.'

Or rather, Barbara Walters.' Shelly gave a quick insincere smile.

The albino ignored this. 'Rest assured, Ms Kurtzmann, by midnight tonight this place will be ablaze with light.'

'And happiness and joy at your ascension, Master,' added Lori. Or Ini-Ma. Or whatever.

'I'm starting the process early, Ini-Ma,' the albino declared suddenly. 'Prepare the others.'

For the briefest of seconds, Shelly saw a flash of...

surprise... fear? Whatever it was, it crossed Ini-Ma's normally placid face. Then she smiled that sickeningly grovelling smile.

'Yes, Master.'

Shelly opted to ask the obvious question. 'Why?'

The albino shrugged. 'It's already New Year's Eve. The energy I need is starting to disseminate already. I shall feed slowly but securely.' He smiled wickedly. 'It will also frustrate those who may seek to stop me.'

Yes! Shelly had learnt a vital piece of information. Like all great journalists, she'd wheedled something out of him. He had enemies.

And where a man has enemies, his enemies have friends.

She and Damien might survive this after all.

'However, at midnight, Ms Kurtzmann, you and your associate will transmit my ascension to the masses of the world. Through your cable news services around the world, for the next twenty-four hours everyone will see my moment of triumph. And they shall share in it. And,' he laughed suddenly. 'And I shall share in them!'

Maurice Devin was frantic, the whole building was vibrating.

It had started shortly after the old man saw his son in the coffin room.

Big deal – they'd had the few seconds of recognition. Now it was time to die.

'Come on,' he'd yelled at the man, but he'd been ignored.

Then he saw the other ESPnets standing in a group. For a moment or two they did nothing then one of them, the South African, convulsed for a second and then relaxed.

Instantly, they had looked out at Devin.

The new one, the cocky American, just smiled.

And the whole coffin room was filled with a brilliant blue light. Devin shielded his eyes, as did the technicians.

Devin could see the energy pouring into and around the coffin room and after a few seconds the silhouettes of the seven standing ESPnets were visible. The light was pouring both in and out of them, it was as though they were manipulating it.

Only the younger Englishman didn't take part. He and his father were mouthing to each other through the door.

Devin strode forward, pushed the old man away and tried to yank open the door to the coffin room.

Locked on the inside!

Devin took out his revolver and fired twice, shattering the lock. He was about to wrench the door open when he was tackled from behind. He dropped his gun.

The old air force man was astride him. 'You bloody fool,'

he was yelling. 'Look at that power. Justin says it mustn't leak out or we're all dead!'

Devin shoved the man off and managed to open the door a fraction before Justin Dickinson pulled it closed again, and his father hurled himself at it to ensure it stayed closed.

Devin just stared at a tiny globule the size of a football, made entirely of the blue light, that hovered momentarily in front of him.

'Oh my God,' said Charles Dickinson.

Then the blue light exploded silently into millions of electric tendrils, crashing into and through the walls of the complex. One of the control area technicians was hit and fell dead to the floor, his corpse a smouldering wreck.

That's when the vibrations had begun. Within seconds, it was as though an earthquake had hit the building.

Devin ran from the room followed by the surviving control area technicians, and down the grey corridor towards the main three-storey complex.

He was dimly aware of the elevator door opening and out of the corner of his eye he saw Doe and Gavalle run into the control area.

Hopefully they'd both die.

Then all hell broke loose.

Every glass floor and wall in the complex cracked – it was like being trapped in a thunderstorm, with the clouds next to you.

Devin wasn't sure how long it took, but it had to be less than a second before the whole lot fell straight down, a mass of glass, chrome and screaming bodies.

Devin dived back into the safety of the corridor with a beat to spare.

Massive splinters of glass dropped like pointed missiles –

no one escaped. Any staff who hadn't died in the fall were sliced apart or speared.

He saw Brel die, a shocked look on his face. In less than five seconds over thirty technicians, guards and scientists were dead, and the Network was destroyed.

Devin turned to go back into the corridor but looked up at the last minute.

Above him was the penthouse office with its massive plate-glass observation window. One minute it was up there, the next it was hurtling towards him.

He ran to the control area, and reached the arch half a second before tons of glass and concrete smashed behind him.

How the hell the control area wasn't damaged he didn't know... unless... unless...

'It's them!' he screamed to Gavalle and Doe, who were standing in the area, terrified by the devastation. 'Don't you see, whatever it is it's their doing, it's brought the place down except for this room.'

'Is there another way out?' Doe screamed, grabbing Devin's shoulders and shaking with fear.

Devin wrested himself away from him, but dropped his revolver.

No matter, it was hardly necessary now.

'The rail tunnel,' Devin yelled. 'Straight down here!' He pointed to the other end of the grey corridor, which was as yet undamaged. 'We go down into the maintenance tunnels and out into the RER! Come on!'

He ran, and only realised that the others weren't following when he got to the door to the lower level.

'Come on!' he screamed once more, but they weren't coming. They must be dead.

He rushed into the lower level, hitting every light switch he could, but the power was out, the relays probably damaged by the events upstairs.

After a few minutes of running, he reached the concealed doorway through which he had intended to hurl Charles Dickinson.

Gingerly, he opened the door and listened. The low rumble of trains – there was one approaching. But once that had gone past he would have quite a few minutes to get across the rails and about twelve metres down where there was a similar doorway leading to the surface, which the RER maintenance workers used.

He stood, listening for the train as it roared towards him.

He smiled – he'd survived another disaster.

There was a crackle behind him and he turned sharply to see the ball of energy, re-formed, its tendrils twisting.

And for a brief second he thought he could see a face in the centre, smiling.

Thérèse Gavalle?!

He barely felt the tendril of power smack into his chest, but he felt the solid ground of the rail tunnel as he landed on it.

He only had a brief second to look up before the speeding train spread his body across its front and the surrounding walls.

The driver presumably saw nothing, because he certainly didn't stop. Indeed, he would not be aware that 60 per cent of Maurice Devin's body was wrapped around the nose of his train until he reached the next stop in twenty minutes' time.

Doe stared at Gavalle. She was ignoring the destruction then, ignoring the events taking place within the coffin.

She was staring into space, smiling.

'Goodbye, Devin,' she said quietly.

Then, as if a switch had been flicked, she seemed to rejoin her surroundings.

'Open the door,' she screamed at that strange old man who Devin had captured earlier.

'No,' yelled Doe. 'If you open it, God knows what'll happen.'

The old man looked up.

'It must stay shut,' he yelled. Doe noticed he was crying.

'My son says it must stay shut.'

Doe looked at the Englishman inside, who was desperately keeping the door from bursting outwards while the old man pushed against the door from his side.

So that's the son you wanted to find, Doe realised.

Gavalle took out her revolver and shot the old man in the back. Twice.

As he fell, the boy inside started screaming and Gavalle dropped her gun and fell to her knees.

She was shaking, and Doe saw that her nose and ears were bleeding.

The boy was still screaming at her, his face contorted with pain and anger.

Suddenly Gavalle managed to stagger to her feet, scooped up her gun and looked at Doe.

Was she going to shoot him now?

‘Tko-Ma is in danger. The Doctor is fighting him. There’s no point in trying to stop these creatures here! They are too powerful. We have to cut off the Doctor’s connection with Earth.’ She scooped up Devin’s dropped gun and threw it to Doe. ‘Come on, Doe, do some real work for a change.’

And Therése Gavalle opened her mind, just as Tko-Ma, the Magnate, had showed her all those years ago on Reunion Island. And used the special power he had given her.

She created a teleportation storm, linked it to the one in England that the Doctor had used and, almost dragging the terrified Doe with her, walked straight into it.

And straight out at the other end, on to a cold wet area by a cave.

Behind her, a man screamed as his concentration on holding open the blue column of light for the Doctor wavered, disrupted by her sudden arrival. He fell to the ground, just conscious enough to keep the light going.

Gavalle looked across at the assassins she loathed so much.

‘Well, go on,’ she yelled. ‘Kill them all!’

Chapter Seventeen

The Holy Egoism of Genius

The journey had been short, not unpleasant and full of bright colours.

What else could the seasoned traveller ask for when going somewhere sans TARDIS?

It was certainly more relaxing than using Evelyn’s Riley.

It troubled the Doctor that at the moment of his departure he had left his friends in such peril. Those assassins had arrived first, automatically grabbing Joe and the others as hostages. The twins, for

all their protestations of reformation, had reacted instantly, and borne... arms, so to speak. And Malvern was so caught up in his bluffs and double-bluffs, the Doctor doubted he was really aware of what was going on.

And Malvern needed to concentrate – without him, the Doctor's return ticket to Halcham was... well, invalid to say the least.

Still both Evelyn and Mel were remarkably resourceful people and he had no doubt they were capable of looking after themselves.

So long as no one got trigger-happy.

Hmmm... what about those people at the Network! If they had a teleporter at their disposal, the inconvenience of being in Paris was not much of a problem.

The Doctor shook his head to clear it of worry – the problem at hand was more important.

He was aware how he must look to an observer now. This plane of reality was grey, swirling mists and dull ochres of land. And here he was, resplendent in his deliberately over-the-top coat of many colours, clashing trousers and shoes, topped off, as it were, with a silver waistcoat made of shot silk and decorated with blue stars.

Basically, he was unmissable in the dullness of the astral plane.

As if in response, blue lightning arced across the sky, illuminating dull wispy clouds that he hadn't realised were there.

The Doctor could see no horizon – the truth was he couldn't see more than about thirty feet in any direction – and as he walked it felt as if he were stepping on sponge cake; nothing seemed quite solid or real.

'It takes... quite a lot of... willpower' hissed a voice to his left. 'Oh, and if you could get off... my hand that'd be nice.'

The speaker was an American, broad Bronx accent, but desperately exhausted. He was lying on the ground, obscured by the mist.

'I'm terribly sorry,' said the Doctor, easing him up. 'And you are?'

'Dudley. Michael Dudley.'

The Doctor wasn't familiar with the name. 'And how do you come to be here, in Wonderland?'

Dudley shook his head. He was having difficulty forming words. 'Sorry,' he said eventually. 'Been here a while with no one to talk to. Not sure you aren't an illusion created by the albino.'

'The albino is here?'

Dudley managed to shake his head. 'No. Don't think so.

But I think he sent me here.'

'I wouldn't be too sure.' The Doctor rustled in his pocket and found a bun from Evelyn's breakfast visit, wrapped in a napkin. 'Here.'

Dudley was understandably wary.

'It's not poisoned,' the Doctor said reassuringly. 'Go on.

Fresh this morning, from a Sheffield branch of Greggs.'

Dudley hadn't a clue what the Doctor was talking about, but bit into the food eagerly. If it killed him, well, better than being in limbo.

After a few minutes, the Doctor was able to ascertain that Mike Dudley had been pursuing the albino – or one of his time-shadow forms – in New Zealand when he'd been

'zapped' here. Dudley hadn't a clue how long ago, but within the last couple of days.

'There's someone else here,' the American said after a while. 'Not seen them, but I know they're here.'

'Oh? What makes you so sure?'

'I can sense 'em.'

The Doctor could have kicked himself. Of course. 'You're an ESPnet aren't you, from Paris?'

Dudley nodded. 'You know of the Network?'

The Doctor shrugged, feeling a now familiar tickling of his mind. Dudley was trying to 'read' him, as Malvern had done.

'I've had what one might call brief connections.'

Dudley stared at the Doctor. The Time Lord's presence seemed to

revitalise him more than a hamper of buns could have done. ‘So, Doctor is it?’

The Doctor nodded.

‘So, Doctor. Whose side are you on?’

The Doctor waved his arms around the void. ‘My own, mostly. There are traps within traps here, Mr Dudley. For all I know, you’re one of them. I trust no one at the moment because, for all I know, my perceptions are being manipulated by you, or by Tko-Ma, or by Sebastian Malvern, or by the Network. The list really is rather endless.’ He smiled grimly.

‘Rather like this place. Endless. Endless.’ He took a deep breath and then bellowed once more, ‘*Endless!*’ He glanced at Dudley who had, not surprisingly, taken a step back from this colourful madman, this interloper, this sophisticated adventurer, handsome and debonair, ready to swash his buckle while facing the evil machinations of a twisted alien overlord and his-

‘Yeah, yeah, I get the idea, Doc,’ snapped Dudley. ‘You’re OK. So am I.’

The Doctor sighed. He couldn’t even have delusions of grandeur without people reading his thoughts. Sulkily he shoved his hands into his pockets, then shot a wink at Dudley from under hooded brows.

‘I’m bored, Mr Dudley. So bored. I thought I was going to face some deadly danger, some ravenous wrongdoer, a capricious curator of craven chaos, an insidious interloper, a –’

Blue lightning crashed through the heavens and immediately a huge creature appeared out of thin air, his body seemingly made up of the very mists.

He was humanoid in appearance, but about twice the size of a normal man. Although he was physically perfect below the neck, from there on up was where it was... well, unpleasant to look.

The Doctor recognised the face immediately – this was the creature he’d seen briefly in the blue column of light at Malvern Hall. On closer inspection, he realised it was possibly blind – its eyes were just slits, gashes that might have been made by a small paperknife. Its mouth wore a contorted expression of hatred, however, and its nostrils were flat and flaring. It had a long neck that seemed to give it a slightly

hunched appearance, although this was more likely to be because of the brain cavity. The top of the creature's head was grossly extended both in height and width, housing a massive brain that was pulsating in the mist, neon-blue veins of power throbbing as it breathed.

Dudley swallowed and took a step back but the Doctor stood his ground.

'Hello,' he said calmly, 'I wondered how long it would take to flush you out.'

'I simply couldn't bear you to go on any further,' said Tko-Ma, or the Magnate, in a cultured, rather charming voice that belied his appearance.

'Well, I was rapidly running out of alliterative allusions and snappy synonyms and –'

'Oh do belt up, Time Lord,' Tko-Ma roared. 'This is my prison, my plane of reality. Here you do as I say, all right?'

'Charmed, I'm sure,' the Doctor sniffed. 'Been on your own rather a long time, I suspect.'

'On the contrary, Doctor, I come and go as I please. As long as my brother walks a planet, so can I. Difference is I chose to return here.'

'Why?'

'Because he's there. Here, I get a degree of solitude and sanity away from his ridiculous plans for world domination, cruelty and avarice.' Tko-Ma sighed. 'Sadly being a prisoner, there's not a lot I can do.'

Dudley found his voice. 'But you said you could go back and forth between wherever here is and Earth. How are you a prisoner?'

The Doctor gestured towards Dudley, but still looked at Tko-Ma. 'My next question.'

'I'm a prisoner.'

'Not that we can see.'

Tko-Ma frowned – it wasn't pleasant to see his already tortured skin pulled even more thinly over the brain. The blue veins throbbed harder and brighter. 'I'm a prisoner because I can't use my powers. When we were put here, they... altered us.' Tko-Ma frowned and

Dudley yelled suddenly.

‘Mr Dudley?’ The Doctor was alarmed.

‘Oh, sorry,’ said Tko-Ma, ‘I was searching his brain for a simile you’d understand.’

‘Well, ask next time,’ muttered Dudley. ‘That hurt.’

‘Sorry.’ Tko-Ma smiled. ‘Got it. I’m like a dog whose tail has been docked but wants to wag it.’

‘They’ve docked your brain?’ asked the Doctor.

Tko-Ma nodded. ‘I can use limited skills but I need to find humans with extrasensory powers on this planet to do most of the work for me. I gave up once I found Malvern – his skill is astonishing for such a ridiculous primitive.’

The Doctor considered this. ‘Hold on, though. You’re manipulating the Network. John Doe, whoever he is and all that lot. Mr Dudley’s friends.’

Tko-Ma nodded. ‘Oh yes. Got to have something to do.

Besides, they’re finding Lai-Ma for me.’

‘Your albino,’ the Doctor hissed at Dudley. ‘This chap’s little brother.’

Dudley ‘Oh’ed in way that suggested he understood, despite the fact that he didn’t.

There was another roll of thunder and lightning.

‘What is that?’ asked Tko-Ma. ‘Been going on for a while now.’

Dudley laughed. ‘I’d assumed it was you.’

Tko-Ma shook his head. ‘Nice effect, though. I like the way the blue adds colour to the drab sky.’ He pouted at the Doctor. ‘As eternal prisons go, this is pretty dreary, don’t you think. Why are you smiling?’

The Doctor folded his arms. ‘Because I know what’s causing your bad weather.’

‘What?’

‘It’s your fault. You see, you assembled a group of people, ESPnets the Network calls them. You used them to find Lai-Ma, just as you used Malvern as your anchor to Earth’s reality.’

‘And as Lai-Ma has some daft woman, the Ini-Ma, who calls herself Loretta. What of it?’

The Doctor eased himself to the ground, watching as the mist wafted around him. ‘Your mistake was assuming the ESPnets wouldn’t have their own agenda. They saw through you – your great plan to bring Lai-Ma back here and serve your eternal sentence. They, and I, didn’t fall for that. You plan to get Lai-Ma back here and usurp his power yourself –

it’s your turn to be reborn, to start again. Part of your game – who destroys the planet first, yes?’

Tko-Ma tutted. ‘You got me there, Doctor. It’s what we do. Our role in the great cosmic scheme of things.’

‘And you were imprisoned for it? Here?’ Dudley was incredulous.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Consider it a young offenders institute. You see, although to us the Cylox here is very, very ancient, to their own kind he and his brother are a couple of thirteen-year-olds stealing cigarettes and having a crafty smoke behind the bike sheds. Then moving on to petty theft, a bit of arson. Enough to warrant a good slap and a few years in a penitentiary, but to the older Cylox, that’s all.’

‘Kids?’

‘Kids. Of course, the ability to destroy this world, probably much of this galaxy, is nothing to them. They don’t care.’ The Doctor stared up at Tko-Ma. ‘You are so utterly immature – you have tremendous power and you abuse it for fun. Fun? Fun! Millions upon billions of sentient creatures have died and you want to carry on.’

‘Yup.’

‘Oh grow up!’

Tko-Ma was suddenly angry. ‘Why should we care? Do you worry if you tread on an ant? Do you think about the cows and sheep when you eat meat? Do you think about them? No, of course not. And that’s what your plane of existence is to the Cylox. An ant hill to be

prodded, and once the creatures start buzzing around we enter their subconscious minds and bum them out. Deal with it, Time Lord. When we get out of here, maybe we'll get into your... your matrix on Gallifrey, yes?

Yes, that's the one. Marvellous dreamscapes we can create and destroy in there.'

'And when the universe is sterile? When there are no more minds to destroy?'

'Then we create a new universe Doctor, repopulate it and start again. I'm sorry you don't like it, but it's what we do.'

Tko-Ma looked up as another blue streak of lightning set the mists glowing. 'What is that?'

The Doctor stood again. 'It's your world ending, Tko-Ma.'

The ESPnets in Paris are siphoning off your astral plane, absorbing it at a terrible cost to themselves. They'll eventually release it safely, turn it into their own form of mental energy and dispel it. But you can't escape the fact that this plane is rapidly fading away, trapping you... well, nowhere. You'll cease to exist. Your sentence will be over. Permanently.'

'No,' roared Tko-Ma. 'You sat here engaging me in conversation, stopping me monitoring the world below.' He stared hard at the Doctor. 'You utter-'

'Ah ah ah,' said the Doctor condescendingly. 'None of that. I offer you a choice, Tko-Ma. You can't access Earth because Malvern is your only link now, and he'll shut off his own mind before letting you near Earth. Yes, a sacrifice he's willing to make. Your little earth wire, your tame Kyto-Ma, has betrayed you in favour of his humanity, his fellow man.'

That's maturity, Tko-Ma, that's responsibility. I can stop Lai-Ma as well, but to do that I need to leave here.'

'Doctor,' Dudley nudged him. 'Is it me, or is this place actually getting smaller? I mean, I can see a horizon of sorts over there... '

The Doctor nodded, but kept his gaze on Tko-Ma. 'Like a leaking bath, your plane of reality is fading fast, Tko-Ma. Are you going to fade with it, or do you want an escape route?'

‘What is your offer, Time Lord?’

The Doctor drew a sideways figure of eight in the air. He did it again, focusing his mind. ‘Help me, Mr Dudley,’ he whispered, and Dudley added his power to the Doctor’s.

Gradually, an infinity symbol materialised.

‘The great thing about being on an astral plane where mind controls matter is that with enough concentration you can create anything. You could have created any number of things to amuse you Tko-Ma, but now it’s too late. I offer you another prison, but one that is safer than this.’

‘What?’

‘Merge with this fraction of this plane. Let me take it, and thus you, away from here before this place is lost for ever. I will keep it, you and, once I’ve convinced him to join me, your brother safe. You choose. Death here, survival elsewhere.’

‘I’d be swapping one prison for another!’

‘You’d be swapping death for life, Cylox! A bigger and better choice than you offered any of your previous worlds.’

Tko-Ma screwed his face up and, in a blaze of neon blue, reassembled himself into a thought wave – which the astral plane reflected as a thin column of blue light. Thinly woven through it the Doctor glimpsed Tko-Ma’s angry visage.

The blue light struck the infinity symbol, which briefly glowed blue then became a dull ochre.

‘One down, one to go, Mr Dudley. Let’s hope Sebastian Malvern is still standing and can get us home!’

Chapter Eighteen

Instruments of Lightness

On Halcham’s little hill by the cave mouth Therése Gavalle was in a panic. Her link to Tko-Ma was gone – she’d been trying to establish a link, to bring him through, obey the mental commands he was screaming into her head, but nothing was happening.

The Doctor! Tko-Ma was bellowing about the Doctor.

And Paris – the ESPnets were siphoning off his power... of course! She had to get back! She looked at Malvern – he was betraying them all, holding open the link that the Doctor would use to escape. But no, she would hijack that 'portstorm to take her back to Paris, just as she had used it as a convenient gateway to here.

She lifted her revolver and shot Malvern in the leg. A puff of red exploded out of it and he dropped to the ground, his face still twisted with concentration. She could see he was trying to keep the 'portstorm going while blocking the pain from his leg. She smiled at this and aimed for the other leg. Bit by bit she would shut him down. Of course, a head shot would solve the immediate problem, but where was the fun in that?

The revenge? Tko-Ma would reward her well for this!

The red-haired girl suddenly started yelling something to the others, distracting Gavalle.

'That portal thing! It's maintaining the link to the Cylox world!' Mel screamed. 'It's the Doctor's only way back.'

Doe, meanwhile, was roaring in rage and desperation.

And, Gavalle detected, a little bit of fear. Good. Useless fool.

Wait a moment. The girl had said the Doctor was in the Cylox world? Cylox?

Tko-Ma had put that word in her mind – that was something to do with him! She needed Malvern after all.

She could go through the 'portstorm and rescue Tko-Ma...

but there was no guarantee she would get to the right place.

Damn, she'd made an error coming here – she needed the ESPnets back in France. She'd force them to send her to Tko-Ma – she could always blow a couple of them away to show the others she meant business.

She had started to move towards Malvern when Doe saw what she was doing.

'Don't you leave me here, you treacherous sow!' he screamed at her.

'Ah, damn you!' she yelled at him. 'It's all gone wrong, thanks to you!'

And she ran to Malvern's fading column of blue light. Her own powers would be enough to navigate safely back to the Network. Malvern tried desperately to get up, to stop her. Or to keep the column linked to where he wanted it, not to her, but his concentration was already at breaking point – and he was bleeding badly from the bullet wound.

Doe realised Gavalle was fleeing. He glanced around. 'Ms Feasance. Get Gavalle!'

This was the mistake the Irish twins had been waiting for. The two female assassins automatically glanced at each other and Feasance set off after Gavalle.

Cellian raised his right arm.

'No more killing!' Ciara screamed at him, but her voice was lost in the general noise. As first Gavalle and then Ms Feasance dived into Malvern's blue column, Cellian sent blast after blast after them with his energy gun.

Just as he'd intended, Ms de Meanour let go of Ashley and Janine and turned to face him.

Joe Hambidge was on the ground where the red-haired girl had dragged him. He was bleeding from a head wound, shaken and very, very scared. He took in the whole scene instantly.

A tall woman with a pigtail was charging towards Cellian.

Ciara was screaming – something he'd never known her do before. Janine and Ashley were in a heap, Janine crying.

And the weedy Englishman was drawing a revolver from the back of his trousers, bringing it up and firing.

One. Two. Three.

Ciara swung round, completely unharmed by the bullets, but with such anger on her face.

Cellian's hand... it was gone! Some kind of gun in its place? Joe didn't understand. How was that possible and...

Ciara was the same, her hand just dropped away and some kind of gun barrel extended out from her arm.

They weren't human! But they were his family!

The weedy man shrieked and ducked as a blast of yellow energy shot out, going over his head.

He rolled over and fired twice.

Not at Ciara, but at Ashley and Janine.

Ashley jerked backwards as if suddenly pulled from behind by a rope.

‘Ash!’ That was the red-haired girl beside him.

Ciara was hurled sideways as the tall woman crashed into her, which meant that whatever gun Cellian had, he couldn’t fire it without hitting his sister.

Joe was up and running at the weedy man with the gun.

The man who had killed Ashley.’

In his hand, drawn from his Doc Marten, was the knife he’d been using to peel the potatoes earlier.

Blunt and rusty, it was hardly a dangerous weapon.

But this man was destroying his family.

The weedy man turned to face him, a look of astonishment, and amusement, on his face. The gun was coming up again and Joe knew he was going to die.

So he thrust the little knife forward and down. Inelegantly.

Inexpertly.

But it entered the man’s leg.

The man fell, staring at the knife, the gun toppling from his hand.

Joe reached it and scooped it up.

‘Joe! No!’ He recognised the red-head’s voice again.

And shut it out.

And prepared to fire the gun at point-blank range. To kill.

Kill? ‘No more killing,’ he remembered Ciara screeching seconds earlier.

Behind him he heard a dull ‘crump’ and two screams.

Turning from the fallen enemy he dropped the revolver unfired as he saw, almost in slow-motion, Ciara falling backwards, with the tall woman thrown away from her.

Cellian was at his sister’s side in seconds and Joe ran to Janine and Ashley.

Evelyn hurried to the female twin, Mel hot on her heels.

The man was cradling his sister, shaking her gently. Her whole lower right arm was gone – whatever the gun was that had been built into her had exploded, and she was quaking with shock, her eyes staring heavenward.

Evelyn spared a glance for the pigtailed woman, but she was clearly dead – she had taken most of the explosion into herself.

‘Ciara,’ the man was saying. ‘Ciara.’

Ciara started coughing. Hacking. But instead of blood, green ooze gobbled from her mouth and trickled down her chin.

She managed to turn her head to the man. ‘Cellian. I’m free. At last...’ she coughed.

The man hugged her closer. ‘Then, so am I. I love you, sis.’ He looked up at Evelyn. ‘You’re the Doctor’s friend, yes?’

‘I... yes, I am,’ Evelyn said weakly.

‘Look after the kids. Please?’

‘But what about you two? What about...?’

With a final spasm Ciara died and Evelyn dropped to her knees to take Cellian’s hand. ‘I’m truly sorry –’ she started to say, but realised his skin was as cold as ice.

She looked at him but his eyes were sightless and he wasn’t breathing.

Whatever connected these two poor souls was only as strong as both of them.

Gently she eased them down to the ground, to rest from whatever demons had pursued them in life.

‘Evelyn!’ That was Mel. Evelyn scrambled up and hurried over to her. She was twenty feet away, with the three kids.

That poor boy who was shot!

‘Evelyn,’ Mel said breathlessly, ‘we need to get Ash to a hospital. He’s badly hurt.’

Evelyn glanced back at Malvern’s column of blue light, but as she did so it gave one last flicker and vanished with a pop of imploding air. ‘That’s the instant teleport gone!’

‘No one is going anywhere,’ said a cruel voice behind them. As one, the two women turned to see the man who only knew himself as John Doe holding his revolver squarely at Evelyn’s head.

‘Drop the gun, Mister!’ yelled a new voice, and everyone turned to see Gary Rudge, PC Watson and numerous other Halcham villagers standing at the ridge of the hill. Reverend Cummings was seeing to Me Malvern.

Rudge lifted his shotgun menacingly.

‘Leave them alone I said.’

‘Sod off!’ screamed Doe. ‘These people know the Doctor!’

They probably work for Lethbridge-Stewart and UNIT and everyone that I’m trying to destroy. Because of what they did to me! To my head!’

‘I don’t know anything about that, mate,’ Rudge called.

‘But move away from the lady. Carefully. I’m prepared to shoot.’

Doe just laughed. ‘And you think I’m not? You think I’m scared of a few more deaths on my conscience? After all that I’ve been through? But I’m not going to let anyone near me until I get some ruddy answers!’

It might have been the rain, or the cold or exhaustion or a combination of all of them. But Doe seemed to start squeezing the trigger of the gun aimed at Evelyn’s head.

Rudge fired first. Both barrels. Straight to his chest. Doe was lifted a good three feet off the ground as he died, landing away from the cave mouth.

The villagers surged forward, pulling everyone away Malvern's 'portstorm.

And then, having bled more than could be good for him, Malvern sighed and collapsed. The blue/grey moiré vanished without a sound.

'But the Doctor's in there!' screamed Mel looking upwards. 'We can't leave!'

The policeman and a couple of the others were carrying Malvern and Ashley down the hill, but Joe and Janine stayed back with Evelyn and Mel. The remaining villagers stared at the corpse-littered cave mouth.

'Jesus wept,' said Reverend Cummings, 'what's happened here?'

Whereupon everyone went quiet.

Until a few seconds had passed, and then the only sound that was heard was from Mel.

'What about the Doctor?'

While that was all taking place in Halcham, Thérèse Gavalle found herself back at the Network.

She knew Doe's assassin was behind her so she turned, revolver drawn, ready to fire as the woman came through the

'portstorm Gavalle had created from within Malvern's.

But what landed at her feet a second later, with a dull thud, was Ms Feasance's dead body, a plate-sized hole drilled into her back.

Gavalle mentally turned off her 'portstorm. With her memories restored, and enjoying the favour of the Cylox or whatever, control of the Network was hers. She would show John Doe what true power was!

Then she took it all in.

The Network was a disaster. Whole storeys of transparent offices and walkways were piles of shattered glass at her feet, mixed with computers, desks, chairs. The whole central complex had dropped away, taking the staff with it. If they hadn't died by falling or because co-workers had dropped on them from great heights, they were speared or worse by vast shards of glass. Pathetic Christophe Brel was lying dead at her feet – pierced by a number of jagged sheets.

But what really caught her attention was the coffin room, shielded by its unbreakable glass and filled almost to bursting with a mass of grey mist laced with ever-moving blue veins of fire. She had witnessed something similar to the mist, in her head when her memories came back. This was Tko-Ma's power. This was his plane, sucked down into this tiny space.

Inside, standing around the coffins, hands linked, she recognised Gaurard, Lanagan, Rosa and the others. And in place of the missing ESPnet who had vanished in New Zealand, was that wretched American, Korte.

But the strangest sight, pressed up against the door, was that stupid old man. Hunched, badly cut and bleeding from where she had shot him, he was still determinedly holding it closed. Why wasn't he dead yet? On the other side, helping to keep the door closed from the inside was the British ESPnet, the one Doe had called an empath, the one who had made her nose and ears bleed earlier. Yes, his abilities were pretty useless to Korte's plan – presumably he was helping keep the old man alive, giving him inner encouragement to keep the door shut.

'Who the hell are you?' she snapped, placing her gun against the old man's head.

'Doesn't... matter...' he gasped. 'If the door... opens just an inch... they won't be able to control it...'

'Dad!' yelled the English man inside. 'Concentrate. Ignore her.'

Oh that's right. Father and son reunited. 'Fools,' Gavalle sneered. 'The door needs to be opened. Let the power out, it will free the Cylox and give me control of their power base here on Earth.'

'No,' called the empath. 'We're barely containing it. If it gets out, the whole world could be destroyed!'

'Rubbish,' snapped Gavalle and blew the old man's brains out.

'No!' The English empath fell away from the door, back into the room in horror.

Gavalle smiled as the door flew open and the maelstrom screamed out around her.

Her smile faded as the first wave of energy buffeted her.

‘Merde!’

And she erupted into millions of disconnected atoms, which were themselves pulverised into nothingness by the Cylox force.

From inside the coffin room, Trey looked weakly out to the complex and sighed. They were all dead now – they’d failed humanity.

And the maelstrom vanished.

On the Cylox plane of reality the Doctor smiled. In front of him, hovering in midair, was the infinity symbol, a Mobius strip about three inches long, and flowing through it, for ever chasing himself, going nowhere, was the Cylox Magnate, Tko-Ma.

‘Only one problem with this little solution, Mr Dudley.’

‘What’s that, Doctor?’

The Doctor pointed to their left. The ground was vanishing, sucked away in a rapidly expanding vortex going...

somewhere else. The wisps of mist were being drawn in, faster and faster. ‘I’ve just closed off our escape route and this plane of reality is about to implode in on itself, with us at the centre.’

Mike Dudley slumped down. ‘Oh well, so long as we saved the world. Shame though. I wanted to see 1994.’

The Doctor suddenly gasped. ‘Eureka, Mr Dudley. Of course. There has to be a central focus on Earth. Trey and the others set themselves up as one, bleeding it into Paris, earthing it as it were, yes?’

‘If you say so. By the way, our world is still getting smaller.’

The Doctor looked around, thinking aloud. ‘Yes it is, like water into a plughole the plane is being siphoned off.’ The Doctor patted his coat pockets. ‘It was here earlier, I know it was... ah hal’ He produced the jam jar he’d shown Evelyn and Mel in the Sheffield pub. He unscrewed it, scooped up the Mobius strip and screwed the lid back on. With a gentle pat on the top of the jar, he dropped it back into his pocket. ‘Right Mr Dudley – down the plughole.’

‘What did you do?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Listen. The Cylox were linked on earth by the man you were chasing.’

‘The albino, yeah?’

‘Yeah... I mean, yes. The albino was a series of different after-images in time. He only really existed once, but he could project... well, time shadows of himself, just as powerful as he, around the world. But the original has to be in a time zone ahead of the others. He has his own version of an earth wire –

the Ini-Ma character. To gain the power he needs to attack mankind’s minds, he is expecting a portion of Cylox energy.

But right now, with the imbalance here, my guess is that too much of this energy is bleeding into wherever he is to equate what’s been bled into Paris. And what happens when you fill a drain with too much water?’

‘It overflows?’

‘Exactly. Except that with this kind of energy it doesn’t so much overflow as... well, go bang.’

‘A big bang?’

‘Oh very.’

‘Then why are we going with it?’

‘Because if we stay here, we die. If we go into the plughole before it all bleeds away... ‘

‘We might have time to run,’ Dudley finished. ‘I’d say we got seconds.’ He grabbed the Doctor’s arm. ‘One thing.’

‘What?’

‘You said this was a guess. What if you’re wrong?’

The Doctor smiled. ‘When have I ever been wrong?’

Somehow Dudley wasn’t filled with an overwhelming sense of confidence!

The Doctor gave the rapidly disappearing Cylox reality a last look. ‘Such a waste of so much potential for good.’

Dudley pulled him by the arm and together they jumped into the vortex that was draining out of the plane...

... and into Micronesia. Gohnn to be precise.

They looked around them – people were screaming and milling about. They were shaven-headed monks by the look of them, plus two westerners who seemed to be showing them out of the huge stone temple Dudley and the Doctor were currently standing in.

Dudley pointed to something. The Doctor turned to see the albino, head back, mouth open, the maelstrom pouring inside him.

He was screaming and gurgling as the mist poured into his body. ‘Too soon,’ he screeched. ‘Tko-Ma, you have betrayed me!’ His body was struggling with the infusion of raw energy, and he thrashed about in pain but was unable to move away –

it was simply too powerful even for him.

‘That’s gross!’ yelled Dudley.

‘Who the hell are you?’ The shout came from a western-dressed man at the temple entrance.

‘Friends,’ shouted Dudley. ‘Who’re you?’

‘Terrified friends,’ the man retorted. ‘Get out of here.’

Dudley saw an overturned news camera on the floor, broken. ‘That’s how he was going to get into everyone’s minds, Doctor!’

The Doctor looked at the albino, then pointed Dudley to the door. ‘Not any more. Go with them, Me Dudley. I need to stop this from going wrong. I need to earth him like we did before!’

‘You’ll die!’

‘Very probably. But so will you if you don’t get out now.’

Dudley looked confused, then ran after the others.

‘Get as far away as possible. Don’t come back!’

Dudley didn’t need telling twice. The monks were all gone and only the frightened American man was left.

‘Shelly’s leading them into the jungle,’ he said. ‘What about your chum?’

Dudley sighed. 'He knows what he's doing. He says to go.'

So they did.

The Doctor smiled grimly as they went, then turned back to face the albino. Except he wasn't the albino any more. He was just a silhouette of the man, filled with the same glow that the Cylox plane possessed.

'I already have your brother,' the Doctor transmitted mentally, as he prepared to place his hands on the man's temples and earth out the power. 'That was easy compared to this. The phrase "this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you" springs to mind.'

'Not necessarily,' said a new, soft voice.

The Doctor frowned as a woman seemed almost to emerge from the shadows behind the albino's immobile shape. 'And who are you?'

'He is my lord,' said a soft American voice. It was a monk, shaven-headed but-Caucasian. 'I was Lori van Cheaden. I was Lucinda Addison. I was Martha Barrett. I was Susannah Hunter. I was Panatos Jones. I was Leaf Snakeskin.

But most of all, I am his Ini-Ma. This, Lord of Time, is my job.'

'Lord of... who are you?'

'Someone he saved. Time and time again. Many times over the centuries. Every life I have led he approached me, preparing me for his final divination. However, he believed I was ignorant. He believed I knew nothing – as a savage hundreds of years ago right through until now. But I was waiting for my allotted task to present itself.'

The Doctor realised. 'You? You're the jailer. You're the one they were kicking against?'

'Indeed. And instead of fearing me this one took me to his heart. The heart of his "mother". Leave, Doctor.'

She placed one hand on the albino's temple. 'Leave now.

Goodbye.'

The Doctor got up. 'You'll die.'

'Of course. All in my bloodline have waited for the chance.'

She raised her other hand.

‘I’m sorry. Generations waiting for this.’ The Doctor was confused. ‘But why must you die to reimprison them?’

‘He underestimated humanity, Doctor. He underestimated us. You have done well to stop Tko-Ma. Will you trust me with the care of both?’

The Doctor slowly drew the jam jar from his pocket and looked at the Mobius strip of the Magnate, eternally chasing his own past and future. He held the jar out tentatively.

Ini-Ma snatched it away and slammed it against Lai-Ma’s outline.

As the jar hit its target the Doctor shook his head. ‘Good luck,’ he added pointlessly.

‘Go, Doctor,’ she yelled. ‘Go now!’

The Doctor started running.

Ini-Ma’s hand touched the albino’s forehead.

The Doctor was almost at the temple door. He looked back. And realised the mistake he’d made.

‘No! Ini-Ma, no!’

The Cylox energy consumed Lori as had been decreed thousands of years before, when the Cylox were first exiled to their plane of reality.

It started to consume everything – the very air itself.

There was nothing else the Doctor could do, so cursing his own stupidity he ran through the temple entrance across the clearing and into the surrounding jungle.

The temple pulsed with the power.

Inside, Lori and the albino melded into one. Then melded into the jam jar and reduced to the size of the Möbius strip of mental energy, all three as one, all three chasing eternity.

The strip began to burn brightly, shrinking and expanding simultaneously, the light blotting out the air, blotting out the busts and the plants and the stone walls.

And all three screamed as they died and the temple simply vanished, the Cylox power burnt out for ever.

The Doctor and the others watched for just a few seconds from a safe point at the edge of the jungle, to make sure, but the clearing was just that now.

The Doctor was staring. ‘No,’ he said almost to himself.

‘Stupid, stupid Time Lord. She was supposed to recapture them, not kill them.’ He sat heavily on the ground, angry at Ini-Ma but more so at himself for not seeing her plan for what it was. Another trap. ‘No matter what they did, no matter how evil, they were only children.’

‘And just how the hell do we get home?’ asked Mike Dudley in his ear. ‘One thing we never had at the Network was a teleporter as powerful as your Mr Malvern.’

The other American man smiled. ‘Hey, don’t worry. Shell and I have contacts. We’ll phone home.’

Chapter Nineteen

Nothing Was Going to Stop Them Then, Anyway The clearing-up process took far longer than expected. The governments of the United States, France and Britain had to get together and decide what, if anything, was to be said about what had happened on their territories. The French had the easiest task – as the Network had been far beneath Paris it was easy enough to literally bury the complex once it had been stripped of anything useful.

The British government’s main problem with this situation was due to the dissolution two years previously of Department C-19. With UNIT now firmly under the control of the United Nations, and MI5 based visibly on the Thames, top-secret cold-war-style departments were out of fashion, leaving no one to deal surreptitiously with things the corridors of power would prefer the public remained ignorant about. The fact that some essentially extraterrestrial activity had occurred in a sleepy English village east of Manchester was indeed a problem, but the press were palmed off with a story about hallucinogenics being put into the water supply after a riotous Christmas party in Audenshaw. When some less-than-convinced journalists from Wapping arrived in Halcham, carrying large chequebooks and wanting to discuss the events of New Year, the villagers apparently knew nothing about anything to which the men referred. As far as they were concerned, New Year’s Eve had been celebrated with a big party in the

pub and as the publican, one Mr G. Rudge put it:

‘Everyone from the village was here, nowt missing, so we don’t know what you mean.’

One person who revealed he had gone home early, however, was the local ‘squire’, a Mr Sebastian Malvern, who said he’d felt a bit unwell and had retired early, mainly because the following day three wards of court were due to arrive. Apparently, the suits learnt – although it took a week or so before the paperwork could be found to back this up –

married friends of Malvern’s had been holidaying in Mozambique over Christmas and both had died in a car crash.

As a result, three teenage children they had been fostering –

Ashley Moby, Joseph Hambidge and Janine Gilbert – were coming to live with Sebastian and he had already arranged for work for them in the village.

The Americans, as usual, had the biggest problem. Firstly, there were locals on the island of Gohnn who claimed the gods had returned for the New Year and fought a huge battle with the spirits of darkness. The gods, it seemed, had prevailed and destroyed the evil spirits, reducing their temple to dust in the process.

A few cable networks picked up on the story, and for a couple of days it grabbed the attention of the American people until two reporters confessed on the top networked TV show *America’s Funniest Hoaxes* that the whole thing had been a scam by them.

Somewhat unexpectedly, rather than being chastised for this, the two reporters, Shelly Kurtzmann and Damien Braun, found themselves picked up by TNT and CNN respectively and seemed destined to have good jobs and incomes for life as a result.

But, as snobbish British commentators were heard to say, that’s Americans for you.

A week after the events in Halcham, the Doctor and Evelyn were called to a meeting of a special council in Manchester.

As they and Mel were enjoying a bit of a holiday, wandering the Peaks, they were a bit miffed, although Evelyn noted that Mel seemed quite happy. Presumably yomping up and down mountains wasn’t

Mel's cup of tea and she was quite happy to spend the rest of her holiday at Malvern Hall getting to know the youngsters – again, so far as Joe and Ashley were concerned.

The Doctor and Evelyn were taken into a darkened room in the basement of the town hall, a marvellous Gothic building that was forever being featured in television dramas when permission to film in London's Houses of Parliament was refused.

Unlike the rest of the building the basement room was ultramodern, with a central rectangular table and twenty-eight comfortable chairs. Massive television screens dominated one wall and, although they weren't visible to the naked eye or ear, the room had more antisurveillance devices than Buckingham Palace. This was the government's tertiary seat of power, but that day it was playing host to members of the UN Security Council, none of whom were officially in the country.

The two friends sat at the bottom of the long table and watched as members of the council wandered silently in, and took seats that had, the Doctor assumed, been previously allocated to them.

That left two empty chairs at the head of the table, opposite where he and Evelyn were seated.

At the centre of the left-hand row of people, the Secretary-General of the UN tapped his pen on the table. 'Good morning,' he said in his soft Egyptian accent. 'I assume most of you here know exactly what has happened in France recently, the existence of the Network and subsequent destruction of both that and the Magnate.'

'They knew about the Magnate?' whispered Evelyn.

'So it would appear,' the Doctor replied.

'To that end, I have requested two representatives from the survivors of the Network ESPnet team to talk to us today, to discuss how they may help us.' The secretary-general pressed an inset button on the desk, and a door that had previously been indiscernible in the far wall slid open, revealing two men.

Trey Korte and Mike Dudley took their seats silently.

The Secretary-General looked at them. 'On behalf of the Uni-'

'Please be quiet, Mr Secretary-General, sir,' said Trey.

Politely. But firmly.

‘Well, I –’

Trey just looked at him, with no expression on his face.

‘Or I can make you be quiet.’

‘Indeed, either one of us could make anyone of you do anything,’ added Dudley.

‘You see,’ Trey continued, ‘we have an interesting situation here. There are nine of us.’

To illustrate this point, nine of the TV screens suddenly flickered into life, causing consternation amongst the assembled men and woman.

Only the Doctor didn’t react. He was watching his two friends. Very closely.

Each screen showed a different member of the ESPnet team, each with an identifying caption underneath. James Lanagan – telepath. Yves Gauraud – wire. Rosa Marie –

telepath. Justin Dickinson – empath. Michael Dudley –

telepath. Trey Korte – telepath. Torrance Hayton – teleporter.

Shari Gotell – pyrokinetic. Yoshiro Taikwana – electrokinetic.

Trey got to his feet and stood beneath the screens. ‘The Network was an underground’ force for evil.: something you sought to thwart. When it suited you. The truth, as I have discovered in talking to my new allies, is that at various times the various governments of the world sought to exploit each of us, using us as instruments of... well, evil is too strong a word.

Of darkness, if you like. Yes, they believed the Network was a UN-sanctioned outfit. Indeed, because of the astonishingly blank mind of its leader, the so-called John Doe... (Doe’s picture now appeared on all the screens, replacing the others)... none of us were able to read him, just as he was unable to store new information. And yes, therefore, no one knew the truth. But that is in the past now. The Cylox threat brought the ESPnet team together, and together we are staying. And yes, that makes us a threat to you. A potential security risk. Could we, one day, rule the world as the Magnate wanted to? Could we replace

“mere humanity” and make you all slaves? Could we manipulate your minds into obeying our each and every whim?’ Trey retook his seat.

‘Yes, we could,’ Mike Dudley took over. ‘But we won’t.

You’ll have to trust us. And trust, as anyone involved with the politics of the East, West and Middle East over the last fifty years knows, doesn’t come easy. But here’s the truth. The ESPnets don’t give two cents for you and your governments.

We are going to watch the greater sphere, monitor the world and our local environs for threats from outside our planet. If President A wants to nuke Colonel B, or Prime Minister C

wants to lay down chemicals in the rivers of Sheik D, that is a problem for you. What we want is to be left alone. Ignored and abandoned. We’re not going to tell you where we are, how we live or when, if ever, you’ll see any of us again. We’re not going to let you exploit us, experiment on us or contain us ever again. Just accept that we are watching over this planet and its people.’

Trey stood again, and joined Dudley. ‘Goodbye, members of the UN.’

And together they walked out.

For a moment there was silence, then everyone started talking at once.

Evelyn nudged the Doctor. ‘That man on the screen, he was John Doe. The man at the cave mouth. He said he had a grudge against you, against dear old Lethbridge-Stewart, UNIT, the whole kit and kaboodle. Who was he, an old foe of yours?’

The Doctor shook his head slowly.

‘He wasn’t even a member of UNIT, Evelyn. Just a poor unfortunate who got involved in things outside his normal purview. I could never have guessed how it would affect him.

I wonder what happened to destroy his mind like that. How terribly, terribly sad,’

‘Who was he? What was he?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Yes. He tried to kill me. I rather like to know about people who want to do that. One day, if someone’s reason is good enough, I might agree

with them.'

'He was a journalist. Not a very good one at that. Mind you, he was a worse photographer. The sad thing is, Evelyn, I never liked him very much. Not many people did, I suppose.

Perhaps if we all made an effort to like each other more, when things go wrong they won't become so extreme.'

'But what happened to him?'

'There was an accident. A piece of equipment I'd built at UNIT had gone wrong, an innocent man died. I asked for the machine to be destroyed but we were in the middle of a devastating battle, and I suppose the IRIS just got put to one side. Sarah Jane found him, she told me some time later. He'd been examining the machine with his usual exhausting enthusiasm and switched it on, and it had... hurt him. The Brigadier sent him away for recuperation and I never thought anything more of it. And now he's dead. And responsible for the deaths of so many others. Poor Jeremy...'

The Doctor's sad reverie was halted by a rise in the outraged noise levels in the room. He sighed. 'Back to work, Evelyn. Let's worry about the now, not the past.' He cleared his throat gently.

The Secretary-General turned to him. 'Doctor,' he said.

'You have saved this planet from terrible threats many times.

Can we rely on your help in stopping this new one?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm sorry, Boutros, but I don't see a threat. Not from them, anyway. Just a promise. If there is a threat anywhere it's in this room, from the small-minded paranoid types who necessitated the ESPnets' stance in the first place.' He got up and, nervously, Evelyn did likewise.

'This planet is very special to me,' the Doctor continued, 'and always will be. But I think that, in the care of the two gentlemen who left just now, it's in very safe hands indeed.

Goodbye.'

And he turned on his heel and left, leaving the others in the room open-mouthed.

Outside, back in the wet and cold of Manchester in January, Evelyn tugged on his sleeve.

‘Do you really believe that, Doctor?’

‘What? That the world is safe under the watchful gaze of Trey and his new friends?’

‘Yes.’

‘No. Not remotely. But if I’d told the UN people that, this planet would be at war within hours.’ He sighed and looked up into the grey sky, letting dirty raindrops hit his face. ‘This planet, Evelyn, is run by insidious, paranoiac types who jump at their own shadows and trust no one except themselves. One more group of them won’t make any difference. Either it’ll end in tears or it won’t.’ He looked back at Evelyn, and put his arm around her shoulders. ‘Depressing, isn’t it’ I’ve just stopped one group of children destroying this world, and directly caused their deaths, and here’s another lot of children with the potential to do the same.’ He thought of similar times throughout mankind’s history and how often such lofty ideals as Trey’s and Dudley’s had gone badly wrong. ‘And now the fuse is lit,’ he quoted.

Evelyn said nothing.

But she was very cold, and not just from the temperature.

Two days later, a recovered Sebastian Malvern hosted a huge party for the teenagers. He and the ESPnets had, expertly, unbuilt the mental blocks in their minds. They’d never be 100

per cent well again. The alien technology utilised by the Irish twins had been very effective, but already the teenagers’

emotional sides were re-emerging and, with a little bit of persuasion from the Doctor, their papers had come through confirming their new official status as Malvern’s wards. Mel saw the Doctor giving Sebastian one of his TARDIS-tracking globes as a ‘well done’ gift. Another one of the Doctor’s

‘agents’ on Earth.

She started to move away from the party atmosphere to get a better view of everyone there. The Doctor and Malvern, Evelyn talking to the landlord of the pub, Ashley Moby in a wheelchair but probably not for long, and Janine already laughing. One day, when they felt ready,

perhaps they would think about going home to families who still thought they were dead. The effect that would have on those families was anyone's guess but with the right counselling, if the kids chose to do it, it could be dealt with.

Joe Hambidge was the problem, as far as Mel could see.

She sat found him in his new room, sitting on his bed and staring into space. 'Hello,' she said quietly, 'May I come in?'

Joe slowly turned to look at her – it was the haunted look she'd seen days earlier. Whereas Janine and Ashley had adapted, Joe still seemed... slightly inhuman.

'It's peaceful up here,' he said quietly.

'Not wanting to join the party?' asked Mel. And then wanted to kick herself. Of course, Trey was downstairs.

Joe smiled wryly. 'I know what you're thinking. But the thing is, as I said to him whenever it was, I simply don't know him. Or you for that matter.' He reached under the bed and pulled out the newspaper cutting he'd found at the village school. 'Or them.'

Mel looked sadly at the cutting. She knew Mark because she'd been at school with him. That's how she knew Joe. 'No one is forcing you to do anything, Joe,' she said. 'But Trey has spent four years looking for you, refusing to give up. He loves you.'

Joe shrugged. 'Does he? I'm sorry but that means...

nothing to me. I don't feel a connection. Janine and Ash, they're my family now, I suppose. Especially with Ciara and Cellian gone. Whatever happened four years ago in Brighton is... well, it happened to someone else. A different Joe Hambidge. Not me.'

Mel sighed. 'I think that's very sad, Joe, but it's not your fault.' She leant over and kissed his cheek, but he didn't react.

'Good luck, Joe.'

And she walked out of his room to rejoin the party she didn't feel like being at.

On the stairs, waiting for her, was Trey.

'Nothing changed then?' he asked quietly,

‘Don’t know what you mean.’ She took his arm. ‘Care to escort me to the ball, good sir?’

Trey stared at the upper landing, in the direction Mel had come from. ‘I’m a telepath, remember. I can read you, Mel, like a book. You might as well have been broadcasting your thoughts over the radio.’

Mel sighed, and squeezed his arm more tightly. ‘I’m so sorry. Perhaps one day he’ll... ‘

But Trey cut her off. ‘At least I know he’s alive.’

‘Has it been a waste of four years?’

Trey pondered that. ‘Honestly? Yes, it probably has. No fault of his or mine though. But hey, I got a job out of it.’

‘Have you?’

‘Yeah. Best let the Doctor explain that one to you, though.’ He threw a final glance upstairs then looked back at Mel, and faked a smile. ‘Fancy a drink, Ms Bush?’

Upstairs, alone in his room, Joe Hambidge took a wallet from the inside of his jacket. He opened it as he had done hundreds of times during the last four years, and took out a now dog-eared photograph.

It showed two much younger lads, one tall, well-tanned and muscular wearing a *Sorry, I’m American* T-shirt, the other shorter and thin, pale and a bit spotty. They were hugging each other tightly outside a cinema in Brighton. Both were grinning madly, their eyes seemed alight with excitement. The moment captured perfectly.

On the back, Joe used his forefinger to trace the words that were written there. Words he’d read so many times.

Love you for ever and ever. Remember that! T. xxx.

Of course, because of the alien blocks in his mind, Trey could never read him now. Never know that although Joe had changed over the last four years, and although he had a long way to go, he’d never actually forgotten anything.

Ever.

Two ladies who didn’t belong in January 1994 were sitting in the kitchen, drinking cold tea and suffering from mild headaches.

Not far away the party was winding down, and they hoped the Doctor would soon take them away from all this.

Mind you, as he was in witty raconteur mode, making the villagers laugh with tall tales about buying shoes on alien planets and having tea with Henry the Eighth, that seemed a while off yet.

‘Is this what it all comes down to Evelyn?’ asked Mel quietly. ‘Is this what love is really about?’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘Disappointment? Rejection? Failure? You and Lawrence

– twenty-five years you said. You said love was about knowing you had... well, a soul mate. Without them, you always felt a little off-kilter. That’s what you said. Yet you and Lawrence are divorced, after all that? And now look at Trey and Joe. Four years Trey’s been searching for him. They find each other and wham – it’s not there.’

‘Maybe it was never there. Maybe the search, the loss, was greater than the love itself. Both boys are different people to the ones they were four years previously. Four years, fourteen years, forty years. People change. You either change and adjust with them, or grow apart. Poor Joe has forcibly become someone else, and Trey isn’t able to deal with that. Nor should he. He’s being truly honest for both of them. You can’t make someone love you, dear, nor make yourself love them. It’s not about that.’

‘Then what is it about?’

‘Love? No one knows exactly. I don’t. I know how it seems for me, but I can’t speak for you. Or Trey. And before you start that again, I certainly don’t know what it means to the Doctor. But one day, Mel, one day you’ll find out. And you’ll look back on all this and laugh and be happy.’

‘And I suppose I’ll remember an old university professor –

,

‘Doctor,’ corrected Evelyn.

‘OK, doctor. An old university doctor who was right all along.’

‘Doctors have a habit of being right,’ said a familiar voice behind

them. 'What are we right about this time?'

Mel looked at him. Looked at the wisdom, and innocence, and charm, and darkness etched into his face, or hiding behind his twinkling eyes. A good man, Evelyn had said. On the whole, that was a pretty accurate summation.

'Doctor, can I ask a favour?' Mel said.

The Doctor nodded. 'You can ask.'

'I need a promise.'

'Oh no, I'm not falling for that, particularly if it involves getting that exercise bike out of mothballs.'

Evelyn perked up. 'Exercise bike? She got you using an exercise bike? I'd pay to see that.'

The Doctor gave her a look that didn't say 'Thank you'.

Mel poked his tummy. 'The favour, Oh Great and Wise Time Lord, is that you and that wretched police box of yours take Evelyn home. Real home. March 2000, her university cottage in Nottingham kind of home.'

The Doctor smiled at Evelyn. 'I think that's a very good idea. That is, if the clapped-out old Riley is up to the journey back to Norfolk. And if its similarly conditioned owner is.'

'It is. As is the car.' Evelyn stood between Mel and the Doctor, linking arms with both of them. 'One thing though.'

'What's that, Dr Smythe?'

'Let's ask the dear old TARDIS to take the scenic route. I do so want to finally see the Eye of Orion!'

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About the author

Gary Russell has spent the last ten years of his life seemingly devoted to this one cheerful old TV show. He edited *Doctor Who Magazine* for Panini for a few years, and wrote some of his comic strip adventures therein, has written six original novels for Virgin and BBC Books, and penned the novelisation of the 1996 TV movie for BBC Books. With his mate Philip Segal, he *co-authored* *Regeneration*, *The Making of...* book about the same TV movie for HarperCollins. He's also written forty comic strips for *Radio Times*, had a number of fingers in the over-egged pudding that was the 'Destiny of the Doctors' PC game and co-produced nearly forty original audio dramas for Big Finish.

At other points during his life, he's been an actor, worked in various publicity departments of the BBC and spent a small amount of time working on magazines about topics as diverse as PlayStations and television soap operas. He's written and edited comics for Marvel Comics, and authored books about Bernice Summerfield, *The Simpsons*, *Frasier* and the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy.

His unfulfilled ambitions are to write a *Stargate SG 1*

script, a James Bond short story, a *Star Wars* novel and, most of all, *The Fantastic Four*.

Life before he hit thirty seems just a blur now. Life beyond forty is now too close for comfort (the number forty seems to have cropped up a lot in this waffle) but seems to involve cats, a lawyer and finally doing some gardening. Yeah, right...

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